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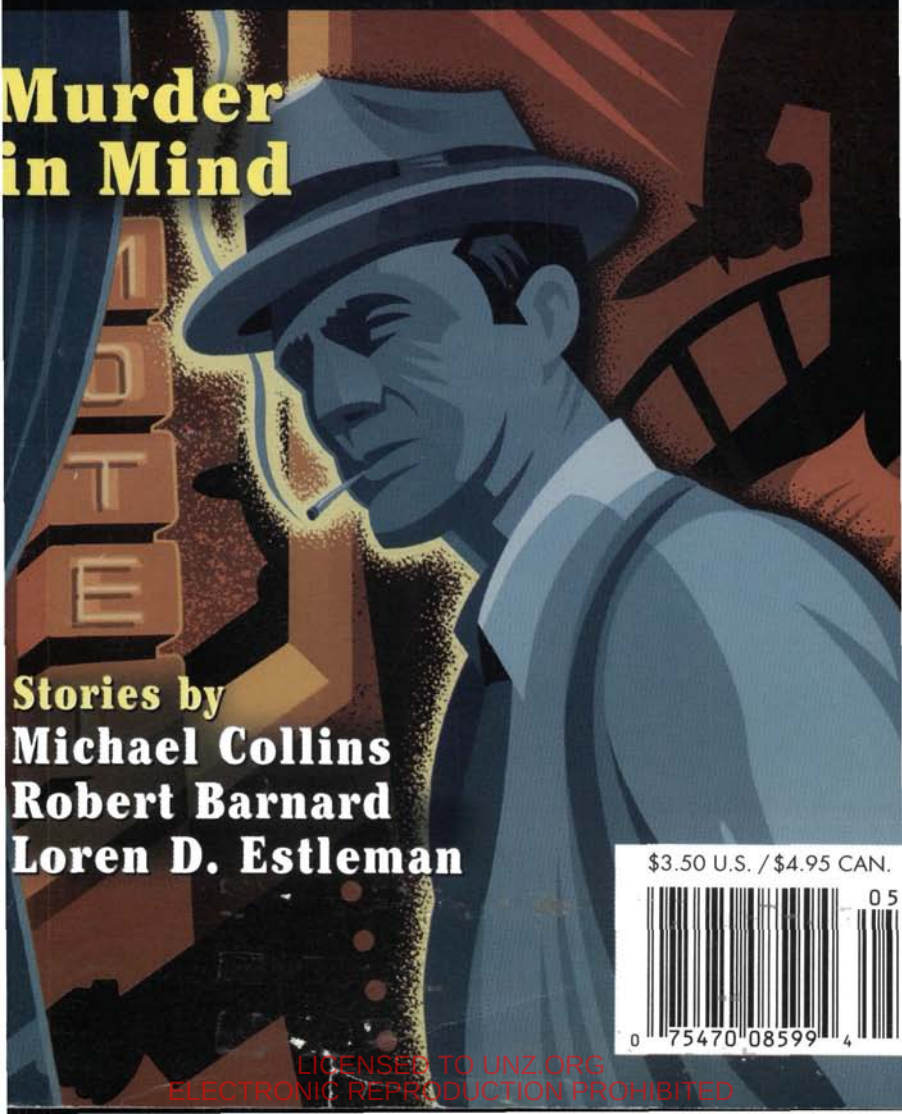

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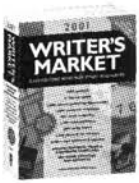

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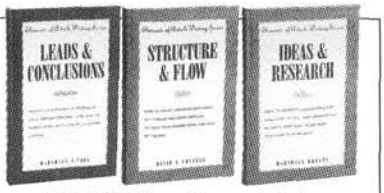

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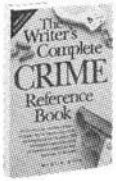

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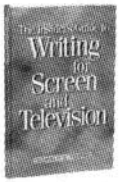

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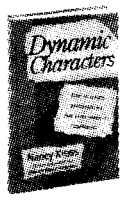

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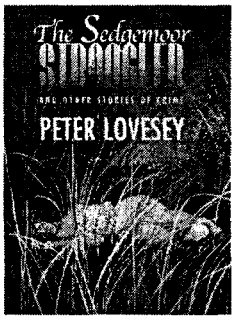

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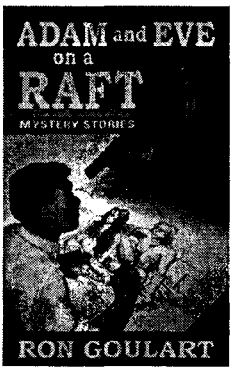

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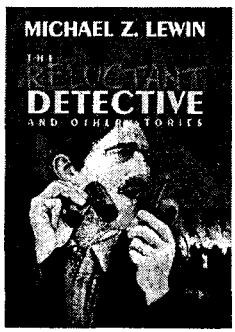

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MINE HOSTAGE

by Neil Schofield

For Jacko, it was like one of those surprise birthday parties, where you walk into your home at night, and *just* as you close the door suddenly the lights come on and people spring out of the brickwork shouting, "Happy Birthday!"

It was just like that, except that no one was shouting Happy Birthday or anything like it. The instant Jacko entered the bank, and I really mean the *very instant* that he put his foot on the marble bank floor, a big, clanging alarm bell had gone off, accompanied by a dreadful electronic whooping. And it was exactly like when an ambulance or a police car or fire engine lets go the siren *just* as it's passing you and *just* as you are having stressful thoughts: The alarm sliced Jacko's brain into two separate and quivering halves. One half was registering the fact that despite the alarm, Del was crowding into his back pushing him further into the bank, exactly where he didn't now want to go, and behind *him,* Mal was shouting, "Go! Go! Go!" which was something he'd picked up from a Steven Seagal film.

So behind him everything was frenzied activity. In front of him

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everything was frozen. There were white faces turned towards him, all with their mouths slightly open. There were only three customers in the bank (quite right, that was exactly why they had picked this time of day), two at the counter and a fiftyish bloke in a tweed hat and raincoat who had been casually strolling to the door, and who immediately stopped dead when he saw Jacko. Behind the glass cages, three or four clerks and a grey-haired man who looked as if he might be the manager were also staring at him gormlessly.

An encore performance by one of *EQMM*'s 2001 Readers Award winners! (See page twenty for details.) Full of unexpected turns and enlivened by the author's characteristically wry point of view, "Mine Hostage" is easily up to the standard set by the award-winning "Groundwork" (11/01). We'll be publishing at least two more of Neil Schofield's stories later this year. †

Del was now shouting, "Nobody move! Nobody move!" in an appallingly loud voice. In fact, his voice had been the deciding factor for Jacko when setting up this job. Del was not bright and not pretty, even in a ski mask, but he was a recognised Shouter, much in demand. Having Del shout at you was like someone pushing a red-hot wire into your motor centres, causing instant paralysis and often lack of the will to live. Meanwhile, Mal was also shouting, "What the hell's going on?" because he didn't know any more than Jacko did how the people in the bank had reacted so quickly. Nor could Jacko understand why there was an alarm bell at all. Usually any alarm was silent, wired to a police operations room.

Del turned to Jacko and screamed, "It's a stitch-up! We been done up like kippers!" Jacko honestly didn't know how to answer this. His brain was moving very slowly and the sweat under the black ski mask was making his face itch horribly.

Then Del moved. He grabbed the nearest customer, the small one who was nearest the door, a meek-looking clerkish type with glasses and a moustache and carrying an office worker's briefcase. Del threw his arm around the little man's neck and clapped the barrels of the sawn-off to his throat in the approved manner, honed and refined after years of trial and experimentation. The small man struggled uselessly, his raincoat flapping like a captured bat.

Del shouted, "No one moves or this bloke gets it!" Everybody winced, including, and most of all, the small man whose hearing was now, Jacko thought, irreversibly impaired. Del shuffled slowly backwards towards Jacko, who was, in his turn, forced to move backwards towards the door. Mal was still waving the Heckler and Koch around like he was watering his lawn. So like that, they all

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backed out of the bank door. The customers' faces had not changed. To be fair, they hadn't had time to change. Jacko later worked out that from the instant he entered the bank to the instant they left, a full three seconds had elapsed. To the people in the bank, it must have looked exactly as though the three of them had simply popped in for a quick hostage.

They tore off their ski masks between the inner and outer doors. The alarm was still braying like mad, and a number of people glanced curiously at them as they came out of the bank. Del was now holding the small man firmly by the upper arm, with the sawn-off hidden between them. Mal, with his usual cool, had magicked the H&K out of sight. So to the casual onlooker they were simply four men in a bit of a hurry.

The only thing that happened as it was supposed to was that the car was still waiting at the kerb, engine running, with rat-faced Gordie keeping the revs up, not chancing even the slightest possibility of a stall. The four of them walked briskly across the pavement, Del half-dragging, half-carrying the small man with him. Mal climbed in the front, Jacko threw himself across the backseat, and Del pushed the small man in and climbed in himself. Mal was now shouting, "Go! Go! Go!" again, which Jacko found extremely irritating, because Gordie *was* going, driving away from the shopping centre, taking the route that they had rehearsed a dozen times.

Everyone was talking at once.

Jacko said, "Shut it, Mal, for crying out loud."

Del said, "We was stitched up! Someone grassed us up!"

Gordie said, "What the bleeding hell's going on? And who's he?"

The small man said, "I really don't think it's necessary—"

Mal turned round in the passenger seat and pointed a meaty forefinger at the small man. "You. What's your name?"

The small man shrank a little and blinked at Mal through his heavy glasses. His moustache trembled a little.

"Brimley," he said, "Ernest Brimley." Jacko now noticed that he had very protruding teeth.

Mal said, "Right, Ernest. I'll only say this once. Button. It." Ernest Brimley closed his mouth or as near as dammit. Mal nodded in a satisfied way and turned back to look at the road.

Gordie, meanwhile, was doing it like a pro, and so he should. There were no squealing tyres when Gordie drove you, no unnecessary gear changes, no hair-raising corners, nothing to attract attention, simply smooth, brisk driving. He was already clear of the centre of town and was heading up the long hillside road that led towards London. He said over his shoulder, "What went on, then, Jacko?"

Del said, "We was stitched up, that's what went on." He was

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staring moodily out of the window, his bulbous eyes red-rimmed with anger and his prognathous jaw working. He squirmed around. "Cor dear oh dear, what the bleeding hell's that?"

"Sorry, I have an apple in my pocket," said Ernest. "I always carry an apple with me. You never know when you might need some sugar in your blood. As a matter of fact, you're probably undergoing a catastrophic fall in blood sugar at the moment. Would you like a bite of my apple?"

"No, I bloody wouldn't like a bite of your bloody apple. And get over a bit." Ernest made himself even smaller and clutched his briefcase to his chest to protect himself from a possible flurry of blows.

Jacko sighed. He said, "Shut up, Del. I don't know what happened, Gordie, and that's the honest truth."

"I nearly had kittens when I heard that bloody alarm. Can only have been a couple of seconds after you went in."

Jacko turned to Ernest.

"What was going on in there, then?"

Ernest shrugged. "I have no idea. I think everyone in the bank was just as surprised as you were. Could you let me out at the next set of lights, please?"

Mal turned and looked at him, then at Jacko. He smiled. Mal was a great smiler, thought Jacko. He was always glad to have Mal with him: He was solid and reassuring with his great wide face and short blond hair; he exuded competence even when things were going pear-shaped. Like now.

"You're a one, Ernest," said Mal. "He's not bad, is he, Jacko? We nearly fell for that one, Ernest, honest we did. It was that close."

Jacko said, "No, you stay with us for a bit, Ernest. You're all right with us. And nobody's going to get hurt."

Ernest looked at him. "I'm not worried—Jacko, is it? It's quite exciting, actually."

"You wait," muttered Del, "you wait. It'll get really exciting in a bit." He had his face pressed against the window.

"Oh yes. I suppose you'll need me as a human shield in case of a police encirclement."

"Stop all that. There won't be any human shields or police encirclements," said Jacko, "because there won't be any police." As if on cue, a siren sounded off in the distance.

"In that case, why are you holding on to me?"

Mal turned round again, his big face creased with irritation.

"You're starting again, Ernest."

"So, I'm not allowed to speak now, is that it? That's very nice, I must say." Ernest's mouth set itself in a sulky line.

Mal looked at Jacko and shrugged, then he turned back to the road and was immediately and suddenly screaming at Gordie, "Left, left, left at the bloody lights, you cretin!" and now Gordie

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was swearing as well. It was too late, there was nothing to do, he was forced to carry on across the lights.

Mal shouted, "Every time, every bloody time, you've forgotten that turn."

Gordie was cursing at himself. He slowed down.

"U-turn?" he asked, but the question answered itself. The lights had turned to red and the traffic facing them was continuous and stationary.

Del turned away from the window. "That prat's going to get our collars felt for us."

Gordie was piteous. "I'm sorry, Jacko. I don't know what it is about that turn. I've got a blank spot about that turn. Don't know what it is. You know how it is sometimes with certain things."

Ernest piped up again, "I know how you feel. There are some telephone numbers that I simply cannot remember, try as I might."

Gordie half-turned, glad to have a supporter. He said, "That's right! Bleeding odd, that, isn't it?"

Jacko said, "What is this, Amnesiacs Anonymous? You. Concentrate on driving and getting us out of this mess. You." Another point of the forefinger at Ernest. "One more word out of you and I'll chuck you out of the window, you *and* your bloody apple."

"Trouble is," said Gordie, "I'm not really sure about how to cope with this, like. We never went this far along. We always turned off up the hill before this."

"There's a side road across there," said Ernest, pointing across Jacko.

"Don't be so stupid," said Mal. "That's a one-way street."

"You're criminals, aren't you? Aren't you supposed to thumb your noses at society's rules?"

"Yes," said Mal, "and we're criminals who want to get away. We done all right so far, but we go up *there* and Sod's Law says that there'll be someone wanting to come down."

Jacko leaned his head against the window. He felt depressed.

"Now we're heading out of town," he said. "We don't want to be heading out of town. Do a U-turn."

Gordie gave him a startled look in the mirror. "What, now?" he asked.

"Yes, now."

"Right." And Gordie did a U-turn, just getting away with it as a Coca-Cola lorry bore down on them. Mal squawked with alarm.

"Right," said Jacko. "Now, do as Ernest said. Take the one-way."

There was a small storm of protest.

"Do it," Jacko said firmly, "and let's get out of this."

Ernest said, "Where are we going?"

Mal looked at him. "To change cars," he said as though talking to an idiot child.

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"Isn't it a bit late for that?" said Ernest, glancing at his watch. "I mean, they'll have had, what, eight minutes, more now, because they had a head start with the alarm and everything. I don't know how far away the other car is, but say five minutes, that gives them fifteen minutes to get the roadblocks up. So you're done, aren't you?"

Mal grinned at him evilly.

"Why do you think we're hanging on to you, my little human shield?" he said.

Gordie did a right turn into the one-way street. It was a hilly rise, lined with parked cars on both sides, and they could see that the way was clear.

"Right," said Gordie. "Let the dog see the rabbit." And he accelerated at a rate that left Jacko wondering just what was under the hood of this thing. He also thought that he would always choose Gordie as a driver, but never, never, never again as a navigator.

They reached the top of the hill just as a Maestro with a woman driver turned in. There was no alternative: She had to back out. Jacko could see the anger in her eyes as she stared and mouthed her fury at them.

Mal said, "What did I tell you? Right, then. That's done it. What now, padrone?"

Jacko said, "Just carry on." Gordie was now peering first in one direction and then in the other. They were entering an estate of identical newly built houses, each with two bedrooms, carport, and pocket-handkerchief lawn at the front.

"Problem is, Jacko, I'm not sure about this. We never been up this way before."

Quite suddenly, Del leaned across Ernest and put his sawn-off very gently under Gordie's ear.

"Just drive, son, that's all. I'm getting really pissed off with all this. Just drive, or I might come over all unnecessary."

Mal pushed the barrels away with a fastidious finger.

"Leave him, Del. He's doing his best. Settle down."

"I can't settle down. I'm unsettled. Very anxious."

Ernest said, "Where is the car?"

"What?" said Mal.

"I said, where is the car?"

"What's that to you, Ernest?"

Ernest sighed. "I know just how your colleague feels. I'm getting tired of all this and slightly carsick. I live locally. If you tell me which road you left the car in, I can get you there. You *do* remember the road?" he added.

Mal stared at him.

"Of course we remember the road. Don't we, Gordie?"

There was a deafening silence from the driver's seat.

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Jacko said, "Dumpton Lane. Quiet. Trees. Big houses behind big hedges."

Ernest frowned. "Dumpton Lane? There's no Dumpton Lane round here." He thought for a moment. "Oh—*Dumbarton Road?* You don't mean Dumbarton Road, do you?"

Yes, Jacko said, that's what he meant. Mal gave him a strange look.

"Good thing you came along, really, isn't it, Ernest?" he said with heavy irony. In a friendly way, but even so.

Ernest said, "Turn right here, Gordie." Gordie's eyes flickered briefly to Jacko in the rearview mirror. Jacko nodded. They turned right.

Without Ernest, Jacko realised, they would have been completely up the creek. He had no idea where they were. He closed his eyes and listened vaguely to Ernest giving instructions to Gordie: Left, now turn right, please, proceed straight across. His voice had that droning, prissy, schoolmasterish tone that driving examiners had. Jacko thought that perhaps that was what you had to do. Perhaps you had to rehearse all the wrong things that might happen. They'd done this run at least a dozen times. What they hadn't rehearsed was alarms going off as soon as they got into the bank, and then getting lost. Perhaps you could be too good at this. After seven perfect jobs, you could get complacent, maybe.

He said, "That wasn't a bank alarm."

Mal turned round. "Do what?" he said.

"I said, that wasn't a bank alarm. Banks have silent alarms. That was a fire alarm."

Del was also looking at him.

"I ain't that bright, Jacko," he said, "but I'd have noticed if there'd been a customer in flames. Spotted it straight off, I would have."

Jacko sighed. "Well, all I know is it wasn't a bank alarm."

Ernest said, "Now, if you go straight across, after stopping and looking both ways, of course, you'll find yourself in Dumbarton Road."

Gordie cackled with relieved glee.

"He's right, Jacko. Look."

And Ernest was right. They had emerged from the housing estate and were now crossing into a neighbourhood of older, larger houses, built in avenues along the hillside. The road to their right led straight to the outskirts of London, ten miles at the outside. And there they could disappear. Jacko immediately recognised the wide avenue lined with beech trees and great Victorian houses secure behind their gates and high walls. There were few cars parked in Dumbarton Road, and those that were sparkled with newness.

Del said, "What we going to do with *him?*"

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"Dump him, what else?" Mal answered.

Del thought. "I don't like it. He's seen us, he knows our names. I say we top him."

Jacko sighed again. "Good thinking, Del. No one in Dumbarton Road would think twice about hearing both barrels of a sawn-off going bang."

"All right then, we could strangle him. Or hit him like anything, all over the place."

Mal turned to look at Ernest, who had gone very pale.

"Thing is, Del," he said softly, "that we've seen Ernest, haven't we? And we know *his* name, don't we? So in the event of anything naughty, like names and descriptions being given to the law, then there'd be reprisals, wouldn't there?"

Ernest swallowed hard.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I wouldn't dream of doing anything of the kind. I've got very little time for the police, if you really want to know. And I've got all the time in the world for the independent tradesman who shows initiative and spunk."

Now they were all looking at him.

"Well," he said defensively, "it's true. Enterprise is being strangled by apathy, vested interests, and globalization. I'm all for people who strike out courageously against authority."

Mal looked at Jacko with a little smile on his face.

"Is that what we are, then, Jacko? Independent tradesmen with initiative and spunk?"

Jacko was fed up with this. "Where's that bloody car, Gordie?"

Gordie was driving slowly, looking from side to side with a worried look on his face.

"I could have sworn it was round here," he said. "I remember that house over there."

Mal said, "Number Forty-Seven. It was by the big tree between Number Forty-Seven and Forty-Nine."

They were opposite the gates of Number Forty-Seven.

"I could have sworn it was there. Over there where that BMW is."

Jacko said, "It was." A deep weariness was drifting over his mind.

"So where is it now?" said Mal, craning his neck and looking in both directions.

Ernest said, "In my view, it's almost certainly been stolen. There's a lot of it round here. The police seem quite unable to do anything about it. Youngsters, probably. They come up here to steal cars because they know most of them around here are expensive and powerful. Then they go joyriding, apparently. It's dreadful, really quite a scandal."

"Well, there's a turn-up. Jacko's horrible luck. Really not our day, is it?" Mal's voice was almost amused.

Del said, "I hate this town. I really hate it." He was staring at

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the back of Mal's head and tapping the sawn-off rhythmically against the back of the seat.

Gordie pulled into the kerb and stopped the car. He turned off the engine. They all stared ahead in silence, listening to the ticking as the engine cooled. There was no traffic. Dumbarton Road really was very quiet, with very few pedestrians. Which was why they had chosen it.

"I don't understand," said Ernest, "what good it would do to change to another car. Surely there'll be roadblocks in place by this time. Four men in a car, any car, would be immediately suspect, I would say. In my view, that is. Though I could be wrong," he tailed off at the expressions on their faces.

Mal said, "No, Ernest, you're right. But in a perfect world, if alarms hadn't gone off all over the place, and if we hadn't got lost,"—looking at Gordie—"and if the other car hadn't been nicked, we'd have been out of the circle with lots to spare. See, you can either get out of the circle very quick before they have time to set up the roadblocks, or you can stay inside it and wait them out. But to stay inside you have to have a place to hide out. And we haven't because we're not from round here, so we get out. Now, well, I don't know. Jacko? Ideas?"

Jacko shook his head.

"Split up. Try to make it alone. Hitch it. Steal another car?"

"You're joking. Steal a motor round here? They're all kitted out with tracking systems. And with the whole town crawling with the law? And them all organised? We'd be picked up soon as you like. Might as well walk into the nearest nick and tell 'em you've got a headache and you don't want to play anymore."

"Right," said Jacko, "we split up, get to the station on foot, by bus, I don't know. Get back up to the Smoke that way."

Gordie said, "I don't like the thought of going back into the middle of town. Not half an hour afterwards, not when it's heaving with the Bill."

"Nor me, but what else is there? Very humiliating, I find all this," said Mal. "No one's going to believe it."

"I hope," said Jacko, hardening his voice, trying to claw back a little of his tattered authority, "that no one is going to hear about it. If they did, I would be very irritated. Very."

"All right. All right." Mal was holding his hands up.

"Actually . . ." This was Ernest, speaking very diffidently. "Actually, you could stay at my house."

They were all staring at him again now. He blushed and licked his lips and swallowed. "I live just round the corner, really—well, half a mile away. You could hide out there. Have something to eat. Leave in the morning. Separately. When the *'heat's off.'* Isn't that what they say?" he finished bravely, looking round at them in turn.

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Jacko had to admire his nerve. Look at him, he thought, a hundred and twenty pounds including the raincoat and silly hat, with his pathetic moustache and his Coca-Cola-bottle glasses and his sticking-out teeth and his ratty old civil-servant's briefcase. Earns ten thousand a year, top whack. And look at us, desperados, hard bastards, bank robbers. And he's the one who wants to get us out of it.

They were all trying to look at each other at once.

Mal was the first to speak. "Well, I'm on." He shrugged.

Del grimaced. "Leave it out. He's goin' to lock us in the cellar and then ring Plod."

Mal grinned. "Look at him, Del. Can you see it?"

Ernest smiled, too. "Actually, there isn't a telephone. It was cut off weeks ago. And I do not believe in portable telephones, in case you're wondering. There is a cellar, but the lock's broken. A determined man could easily push his way out."

"Right," said Jacko democratically, "who's for it?"

Gordie shrugged. "What else is there? We leave the car here?"

"Sure," said Mal. "They're going to find it and figure we swapped motors and that we're well away. Who's going to believe we went home for tea with the hostage?"

Del gave in. They climbed out of the car.

"Gloves," said Jacko, "*and* shooters." He directed this at Del, who was trying to hide the sawn-off inside his windcheater. Del looked sulky, threw the sawn-off into the back, and then stripped off his gloves like the others.

"Del," said Jack quietly, "you and Gordie walk with Ernest. Just in case," he added.

Ernest struck off briskly down Dumbarton Road, flanked by Gordie and Del. Mal walked twenty yards behind with Jacko.

"Bit of a turn-up, Jacko," Mal said.

"Stuff happens," said Jacko.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming you. Everything was perfect until we walked in the place."

Ahead of them, Ernest and the other two had turned right into a little lane that ran between two of the houses.

"You had it right—place, timing, and everything. Nice fat little bank like that, nice little town, lots of exits, lots of light industry around, and lots of high-earners, lots of shops dumping their takings. Not too much Law around, near enough to the Smoke to let us lose ourselves sharpish."

They came out of the lane and crossed another smaller road with fewer houses. Ernest had darted down a tiny lane lined with trees that seemed to run across a piece of featureless common. There wasn't a house in sight, Jacko was glad to see.

"Don't let it get to you, Jacko, is all I'm saying. It's the first time

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we've drawn a blank. It happens. We could do that place again next week. They'd never expect it."

They could now see a high wall on their right behind the trees. Jacko saw that Ernest had turned into a small path and was approaching a door set in the wall. He took a bunch of keys from his raincoat pocket and unlocked the door. He let Gordie and Del go in and waited for Jacko and Mal.

"Here we are," he said. They walked through the door into a jungle: a garden path half-covered with brambles. Ernest went ahead, leading them out onto what had once been a vast lawn, now overgrown. Beyond this prairie stood a huge house.

"Cor Christ, it's a bloody mansion," said Mal.

Ernest smiled. "Not quite," he said, "but it is big, isn't it? My parents lived here."

They walked towards the house. Jacko felt suddenly rather shy, as if he were twelve years old and going home with a new friend for the first time.

They climbed the wide stone steps to the front door. Ernest let them in and they found themselves in a spacious hall, facing a wide, sweeping staircase.

Gordie looked round, his ratty face alive with admiration. "Tell you what, Ernest," he said, "this is quite a drum you got."

Ernest threw his briefcase carelessly into a corner next to a coatstand. He shook off his raincoat and hung it up. Then he took off his tweed hat with care and hung that up, too. Suddenly, Jacko realised that Ernest wore a wavy auburn wig. He began to feel a little warmer towards the poor little sod.

"Thank you, Gordie," Ernest said, "but it's not really mine, not anymore. Come through to the kitchen." He walked down past the staircase and pushed open a door which led into the biggest kitchen Jacko had ever seen. There was a giant Aga range along one wall, a vast Welsh dresser along another, and an enormous wooden table in the middle.

Ernest turned to them. "I think it's time for a drink, don't you?"

Mal put an arm round his thin shoulders. "That's the most sensible thing you've said since the day I met you, Ernest," he said. Ernest smiled shyly and pulled open a large cupboard. Jacko noticed that there were not many provisions: a few tins and packets, that was all, but there were some bottles. Ernest pulled out a few.

"Let's see," he murmured, "there's whisky, malt if you prefer it, there's some gin left, a vodka, that's full, I never touch it myself although my mother was very partial to it. There's even a drop of rum for those who like it."

He took down glasses and then went to the fridge and took out a tray of ice.

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"Help yourselves," he said. Jacko hadn't realised until that moment just how much he needed that first drink.

When they had all served themselves Ernest raised his glass. "To us."

Jacko realised that all the others were feeling as ridiculously shy as he was. Mal was the only one who really responded to the toast.

"Here's mud in your eye, Ernest. Good on you." The others mumbled incoherent things into their glasses. Del, in particular, looked as if he suspected the whole thing was a cunning trap. He had clearly measured the distance to the door, and his eyes were flickering from side to side.

Gordie clearly felt an odd need to keep a reasonable cocktail-party-type conversation going.

"So, how's that then, Ernest, it's not yours anymore?"

Ernest swallowed. "It's actually going up for auction tomorrow. Goodness, I'm forgetting my manners. Please sit down, everybody. I'm afraid this is one of the very few rooms with any chairs in it. Otherwise we could make ourselves more comfortable elsewhere."

They all took their places around the table and stared at Ernest.

"There's a large notice on the front gate, but of course we didn't come in that way. No, I'm afraid it's one of those sad stories that are all too common in our society."

"How's that, then?" asked Jacko, trying to keep his end up.

"It was my parents' house for years and years. My father was originally in the army commanding a training unit, and then left to go into business. Unfortunately, he was a better soldier than a businessman. Eventually he had to mortgage the place to keep his company running. Then, when my mother became very ill, he was forced to take out more loans again to pay for her nursing. I'm afraid he wasn't very prudent or farsighted, my poor old dad. My mother died last year."

Everyone acknowledged this with a grunt or a movement. Ernest shrugged.

"He followed her not long after. So that left the place completely mortgaged, absolutely nothing in my father's estate, and me, well, I work in an insurance office, and I simply can't service the mortgages on my salary. So, the bank seized the house, as banks do, and it goes up for auction tomorrow. I've cleared as much of the furniture and things as I could. The rest they can have. I don't care."

"Terrible," said Mal. "Bloody swine, they are."

"Swine indeed, Mal," said Ernest, his eyes shining and his moustache trembling slightly. "All too ready to hand out the money, all too ready to encourage people to take out enormous loans when times are good. But when times are bad, is there any understanding, any sympathy, any give in their attitude?"

Jacko watched him. "So where you going to live, then?"

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Ernest smiled. "Oh, I'm all right, Jacko," he said. "I've got a rented flat in town. But it would have been nice to take over the place, give it a bit of a going over, clear the garden and so on. Still. It is not to be and that's all there is to it."

Jacko nodded. He knew people who'd been caught in the property trap. They all did.

"Bloody banks," said Del suddenly and unexpectedly. "I hate bloody banks."

They all grunted in agreement. They all hated bloody banks.

"So," said Ernest, "you'll understand why I have no sympathy for the bloody banks and a lot of sympathy for bank *robbers*. And why I really would rather you got away with it."

Jacko thought that they really weren't getting away with much. Their skins, was all, really. But it all made a silly kind of sense.

"Now," said Ernest, "I suggest we all have another drink or three, and then I'll make us some supper. It's going to be pot luck, I'm afraid." Everyone made the deprecating gestures and noises that people make, to reassure Ernest that they really didn't mind, that anything would be fine with them, that they were sure it would be absolutely delicious.

"But I'm sure I can whip up something halfway reasonable. I'm sure you must all be ravenous. And there are still a few bottles of my father's claret in the cellar. No point in leaving that for the bank, is there?"

They all agreed that that would be silly.

"Be criminal," said Mal with his big smile, "absolutely reprehensible."

Ernest smiled widely at him, his lips peeling back over his buck teeth. Poor little Ernest, thought Jacko. Then he felt immediately guilty.

"I'm not bad at the old cooking," he said. "I'll give you a hand."

Ernest turned his beam on Jacko.

"That would be very kind, Jacko, " he said, "very kind indeed."

In the event, they made quite a party of it. Ernest found some lamb cutlets and pork fillet in one of the freezers, defrosted them, and made them into a massive casserole with potatoes and carrots and a rich sauce flavoured with herbs from the kitchen garden. Jacko helped with the vegetables and learnt some handy tips from Ernest on the best way to thicken a sauce *without* using flour. As he was taking down plates from the dresser he looked at the postcards pinned to the shelf edge. They were all pictures of brilliant white beaches curving away alongside a pure blue sea. Ernest saw him looking and smiled.

"Brazil," he said. "I've always dreamed of going down there, opening a little business. I'm sure I could do very well. I even

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learned a little Portuguese last year. But then I suppose everyone has their dreams. Silly, isn't it?"

Jacko didn't think it was silly at all. In fact, he had his own very similar sort of dreams. But he didn't say so.

The casserole was terrific, and there was even a frozen loaf of bread which he also defrosted and warmed up and which was delicious. Ernest told them that his mother had made her own bread and he had made this to her recipe. After that, they chewed more respectfully and swallowed with reverence.

And they finished off the last of Ernest's father's claret. Five bottles of it, to be precise. Mal smiled a lot, Gordie giggled, Jacko leaned back, not saying very much but feeling the last of his tension slowly seeping away, and Del unwound enough to actually give Ernest some tips on the best way to enter a bank while shouting.

After supper, Ernest apologised for the lack of after-dinner entertainment.

"There was never a television in the house," he said, "my father couldn't stand it. And I'm afraid I took away the radio and the record player."

But he did find a pack of cards in a drawer and so they taught Ernest to play poker until very late, drinking the malt whisky and a bottle of brandy that had come up with the claret. There were even some of Ernest's father's cigars to be had. Jacko wondered if this was why Ernest's father's business had gone under.

Del paused while dealing a hand of five-card draw, took out his cigar, and pointed at Ernest. Ernest blenched and nearly jumped a foot in the air.

"You're all right, you are, Ernest my son," Del said. "Sound as a pound, you are, and I'll *do* anyone who says you aren't."

He looked defiantly round the table, but happily none of those present was ready to say that Ernest was not all right and as sound as a pound. No one wanted to be *done* by Del.

While eating, they had discussed the following morning.

Ernest recommended that they leave singly, at decent intervals, and walk down the hill to the station, which was conveniently close. There were trains every half-hour to St. Pancras station in London. He even went so far as to offer them some of his father's clothes, which still hung upstairs, to change their appearances a little. But they all declined, deciding that they would stay as they were, without being able to say exactly why.

At half-past one, they went off to sleep on the four beds that still remained in some of the six bedrooms upstairs. Ernest found some blankets, and announced that he would sleep on the sofa in the drawing room.

Again without knowing why, they all shook hands with Ernest

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before retiring. He showed them to their rooms, still with his beaming smile, and his eyes shining behind the glasses.

Jacko slept like a log until eight o'clock. When he got downstairs to the kitchen, Ernest was brewing up another pot of tea and Mal was sitting at the kitchen table chewing toast.

"Del and Gordie?"

Ernest turned from pouring water.

"Del went off at six," he said, "and Gordie left an hour later. He said to tell you he'd see you at the usual place in a couple of days."

Jacko nodded.

Mal swallowed his last bite of toast. "Right, that's me," he said and got up. He shook hands with Ernest. "Thanks a lot, Ern," he said. Then he punched Jacko lightly on the shoulder. "Be lucky. Don't let it get you down. We'll do it right next time."

When it came to Jacko's turn to leave, Ernest walked him to the main gate, from which hung a large placard announcing the sale by auction.

Jacko shook Ernest's hand awkwardly.

"Thanks a lot, Ernest. I hope everything comes right for you."

It seemed strange to be thanking a civilian. But Ernest smiled at him.

"Don't worry about me, Jacko. And I'm sorry about the bank."

"It happens," said Jacko and turned away.

"Jacko," Ernest called after him. Jacko turned round.

Ernest said, "Just—well—just *don't take it personally.* That's all."

Jacko walked down the hill and into the station without a glance from anybody. He bought a paper and took the first London train that came in.

He settled into a corner seat among the commuting City workers and opened his paper. Even after all this time, it still gave him a weird thrill to see the video-camera stills from a bank he was pictured in the process of robbing.

He looked at the four muddy E-fit photographs and read the article, together with the other follow-up pieces inside. Then he folded the paper and stared out of the window. He considered briefly getting out of the train and going back. But he knew it would be too late.

Well, he'd been right about the fire alarm, anyway, set off by a new and nervy sixteen-year-old bank clerk. It had been her first day and she didn't know about silent bank alarms, but she knew how to set off a fire alarm when she saw one. She was now under deep sedation but would be able to take up her duties again soon. Jacko was pleased for her. About the rest of it, there was a certain amount of confusion. Reading between the lines, it was clear that the police didn't know what the hell had gone on.

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He watched the scenery go by and began to wonder a few things.

First, he wondered how to explain to the others that the apple in Ernest's pocket was actually (the police were absolutely, well, *virtually,* certain) an Army practice hand grenade, completely harmless. But the bank staff had found it quite convincing enough, thank you very much, and so the old briefcase that Ernest had tossed carelessly into a corner had been stuffed with one hundred and thirty-seven thousand pounds.

Then he wondered how Ernest looked without the wig, the moustache, the buckteeth, and the glasses. He couldn't imagine. And he was certain that nobody else would be able to imagine, either. The only picture that came into his mind was that of an egg, featureless and blank.

He also wondered if Ernest had helped them out because he felt sorry for them (and *that* made him squirm in his seat) or because, if they were collared, then he'd probably be nicked, too. He decided that it was probably a bit of both.

Next, he wondered if the bank was a branch of the same one that had seized Ernest's father's house to sell by auction. He thought it was very likely, and found that he rather hoped so.

And finally, as the train moved, under grey and threatening skies, through the grubby London suburbs towards St. Pancras, he wondered idly what the weather was like today in Brazil. ●

The Witch and

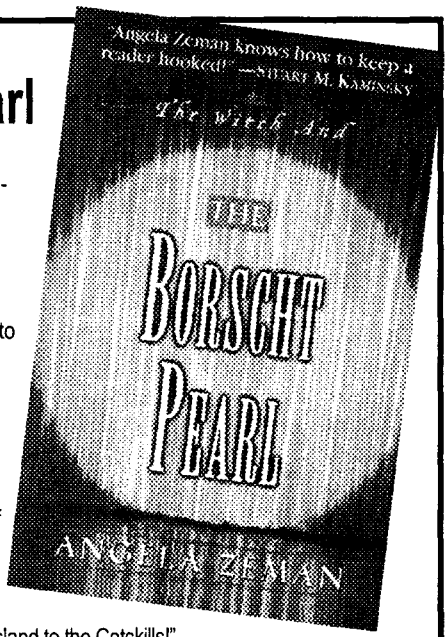
The Borscht Pearl

a new book by Angela Zeman

Retired and destitute Borscht Belt comedienne, Pearl Schrafft, must engineer a come-back at all costs. Her one asset, a necklace, is stolen, betrayal runs rife, and someone murders her manager. Mrs. Risk, the 'witch' of the title, rushes to aide Pearl, the main suspect.

The book received praise from **PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY** magazine, as well as from

***Edward D. Hoch*, Grandmaster of Mystery Writers of America**: "Fans of Angela Zeman's unique witch detective, Mrs. Risk, will welcome her first appearance in a novel, complete with multiple murders and a trail that leads from Long Island to the Catskills!"



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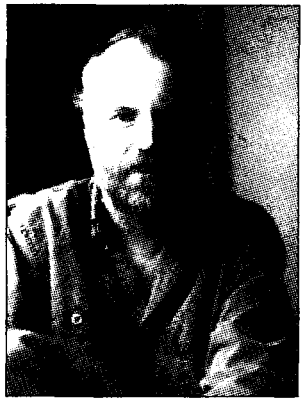
David Handler



Peter Sellers

Neil Schofield

2001 READERS AWARD

Okay, we confess—your choice for this year's first-place Readers Award spot took us completely by surprise. We thought we were taking a big risk when we published "Avenging Miriam" by Peter Sellers (December, 2001), for its tone is dark and the crimes it depicts shocking. Would readers quail, we wondered, or would they appreciate the timeliness of the subject and the incomparable twist at the story's end? The arrival of the first Readers Award ballots put all doubts to rest—"Avenging Miriam" was overwhelmingly your favorite story of the year.

The name Peter Sellers is well known to devoted readers of the short mystery story; it is a name that can be found on tales published in every major crime-fiction magazine from *EQMM* and *AHMM* to *Hardboiled* and *Canadian Fiction Magazine,* and on three stories nominated for Canada's Arthur Ellis Award. It is also the editorial byline of the groundbreaking Canadian short crime-fiction anthology series Cold Blood, which was founded by Peter Sellers in 1987.

A Toronto native, Mr. Sellers has also been tireless in promoting short mystery fiction in non-print formats. He has produced more than thirty-five books on tape, organized several Canadian mystery conventions, and served on numerous prize committees. To date, his fiction consists exclusively of short stories, which makes him a rare and valuable find for *EQMM,* which has been publishing his work since 1993. We congratulate this author, editor, and all-around man of mystery on a superb story and a truly unforgettable Readers Award win!

A very long short story (some would say "novella") was your enthusiastic second choice this year. "The Mondo Whammy" (September/October, 2001) is the work of novelist David Handler, who started writing short fiction only two years ago, after nearly a dozen of his novels had seen print. Mr. Handler seems to be a natural at any

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length, and "The Mondo Whammy," which draws on his early experience as a staff writer for TV sitcoms such as *Kate and Allie,* has a whopper of a surprise ending. Like the protagonist of his splendid whodunit, the Edgar and American Mystery Award-winning author is a Los Angelean whose work as a journalist, critic, and scriptwriter took him to New York City. With novel-writing now occupying most of his time, he has moved to a carriage house in Old Lyme, Connecticut. *EQMM* published his first short story, "The Cure," in February of 2001. We hope the scroll he will receive for this Readers Award win will hang on his wall in Old Lyme, reminding him, as he works on the new series of mystery novels he recently began, that he also has an appreciative audience for his short stories.

Our vote tally gives third place to what may be the most outrageously funny crime story of the year. (And a devilishly clever one, too!) Full of bizarre ironies, "Groundwork," by Neil Schofield (November, 2001), is set in the author's native England, though he currently lives in Normandy—"far enough to make life agreeably different," he says, "but near enough for me to keep a beady eye on what my countrymen are up to." In less than two years, Mr. Schofield has sold seven stories to *EQMM,* including his mystery-fiction debut, "Hit-and-Mrs." (February, 2001). He is one of the most energetic and talented newcomers to the mystery scene, but he is hardly new to professional writing. He spent most of his working life as a business writer, producing materials for corporate events, videos, and tourist rides, and he sold two mainstream short stories to the British short-story magazine *World Wide Writers* before submitting his first crime fiction to *EQMM.* He has since been published in *AHMM* as well, and is currently at work on a novel. Mr. Schofield describes his ambition as, "To Entertain. Full stop." His witty tales for *EQMM* have clearly hit that mark!

OTHER FINALISTS IN THE COMPETITION

Fourth . . . . . "Lesser-Included Offense" by Jeffery Deaver

Fifth . . . . . "Leopold at Bouchercon" by Edward D. Hoch

Sixth . . . . . "The Cobalt Blues" by Clark Howard

Seventh . . . . . (tied) "Remaindered" by Lee Goldberg
"Piranha to Scurfy" by Ruth Rendell

Eighth . . . . . "Rnsom" by John Biguenet

Ninth. . . . . "The Honored Guest" by Marianne Strong

Tenth. . . . . "The Problem of the Yellow Wallpaper" by Edward D. Hoch

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The Soul of Deception

by Brynn Bonner

Deborah's sharp intake of breath came like the *whoosh* of a hydraulic brake as she entered her mother's dining room and saw her father sitting at the head of the table. A cup of steaming coffee was on his saucer and the morning paper was folded neatly beside his plate. It was a homey sight and wouldn't have been at all out of the ordinary—except for the fact that her father had been dead for well over two years.

"Deborah!" her mother startled, a hand to her sagging bosom as she came through the swinging doors from the kitchen. "You almost gave me a heart attack! I didn't hear you come in!"

Brynn Bonner's short stories are enjoyable in no small part because she so accurately depicts all the nuances of the relationships between her characters. This time, she's also worked some clever surprises into the tale. The North Carolina author is currently at work on a novel. She got her start in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories with a piece that subsequently won the Robert L. Fish Award. ✝

"I-I-I," Deborah stammered, her eyes still fixed on her father. He had remained entirely motionless and silent throughout the exchange—as he would have, being made from canvas and cotton batting.

"You caught me before I had a chance to clear up breakfast," her mother fussed, grabbing at a plate soiled with poached egg and toast and heading back to the kitchen.

Deborah stood rooted to her spot, tilting her head and examining the specimen of her father as if trying to understand some alien species. The face was painstakingly sculpted and painted, the gray hairs applied individually and so skillfully she wondered idly if they had to be trimmed occasionally. "Mama, what is this?" she asked, her voice now taking on an exasperated tone.

"It's nothing, Deborah," her mother called from behind the door. "Don't trouble yourself about it. It's just a doll. Mrs. Leiberman

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told me about a woman who makes life-sized dolls and I decided to have one made of Shelton. Don't make more of it than it is," she said as she pushed back through the doors and used her hand to brush a few crumbs of toast from the tablecloth. She pushed in her chair, picked up the newspaper, and placed it on the top of a neat stack in a wicker basket. Then she grabbed her pseudo-husband by the hair and hoisted him up, swinging him unceremoniously around the back of the chair and depositing him with a thump in an armoire in the hallway. "There," she said, wiping her hands on her housedress, "all tidied up. What are you doing here so early, dear?"

"I came to bring you your prescription, Mama. I knew you were almost out," Deborah said, squeezing the bridge of her nose and struggling to keep her voice level. "Now tell me about this—" she hesitated, motioning vaguely toward the armoire, struggling to fit a word to the situation. In the end she could find no better characterization than her mother's— "this *doll.*"

"What's to tell? It's nothing, Deborah. I told you. It's *just* a doll," her mother said, trying to sound defiant, but her voice was now quivering.

Deborah sighed and pulled her mother into the living room and sat her down. The plastic her mother insisted on keeping over her *davenport* crinkled under Deborah's legs as she sat down beside her.

"Mama, this can't go on," she said softly. "Pops has been gone for a while now. You're going to have to accept it. You've got to find a way to get on with your life. It's time."

"I *am* 'getting on with my life,' as you say." She mimicked Deborah's delivery. "I get on just fine. You're just blowing this up all out of approportion, Deborah."

"Proportion," Deborah corrected absently.

"Whatever," her mother said, patting her hair. She wore it skinned back into such a tight bun the tension in her face gave her a perpetually questioning look. "I know very well that Shelton is gone. I've accepted it and I'm getting on just fine."

"Mama," Deborah said, throwing up both hands and letting them fall helplessly on the couch's cushions, "you have pictures of Pops in every room of the house, you've kept all his clothes and things—you still keep up all his magazine subscriptions, for God's sake!" She plucked a copy of *Popular Mechanics* from its place in the fan configuration on the coffee table, presenting it to her mother as evidence.

"I like to look at that magazine sometimes, too," her mother said, turning away from the offending issue and feigning interest in the arrangement of chotchkes on the coffee table: a silver cigarette lighter, though no one in the house had ever smoked; a candle carved into the shape of a fish, which she'd never allowed

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anyone to light; and a cut-glass candy dish filled with buttermints circa 1970, which no one ever ate. "It's inter-resting."

"Oh, it's inter-resting, huh?" Deborah asked, flipping open the pages and reading, " 'Toolbox Treasures: Great New Picks From the Hardware Show'; 'The Best Wet-Dry Vac on the Market'; 'The Car Clinic: Fixing a Leaky Radiator.' Yeah, Mama, this is right up your alley," she said, slapping the magazine shut.

"You don't have to get sardonic with me, Deborah," her mother said, pulling herself up straighter and arranging the magazines back into their perfect fan.

"*Sarcastic,* Mama," Deborah said through clenched teeth. "I don't have to get *sarcastic* with you."

"No, you don't," her mother agreed, smiling as she patted her daughter's hand and picked lint off the sleeve of Deborah's new coat.

Jimmy squinted at the brownstone, concentrating. The woman had gone in a good ten minutes ago. She was dressed in a long black coat and looked all business. A fed? But alone? *Feebs* almost always worked in pairs, he was pretty sure. Somebody from the prosecutor's office? Whatever—he didn't like how this was shaping up. Too many loose ends.

He'd never had things go bad like this. He was a meticulous planner. His brother Joey had given him the nickname Jimmy the Nitpick for his attention to detail. It had bugged Jimmy at first, but it was better than what they called Joey—behind his back, anyway.

Joey'd had only one ambition from the time they were snot-nosed little boys. Joey wanted to be a wise guy. He wanted to be connected. He started carrying a switchblade when he was fifteen and calling himself Joey the Blade. But Joey had one problem—he just didn't have it in him to hurt anyone. When this became obvious his buddies had started calling him Joey the Butter Knife.

Jimmy had never had the kinds of ambitions Joey had. He didn't want to be connected. He didn't care about rank or respect. He pretty much just wanted to be left alone. But he did like money. Jimmy would do anything for anyone if the price was right. No loyalties or constraints. He took a job, or he refused it, his choice. An independent contractor.

No, Jimmy didn't share his brother's ambitions. He also didn't have his brother's sweet nature. That was for people who wanted to end up having friends snicker behind your back. Jimmy didn't want the snickering—or the friends.

What Jimmy had was a flourishing assortment of idiosyncrasies and urges. Like now he really needed to step over and check the return-change slot on the pay phone outside the little bodega where he was skulking in the doorway watching the brownstone. He'd already checked it five or six times since he'd been waiting.

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and no one had used the phone in the meantime. But he felt a pressing urgency to check it again. This time it might have a coin in it. There was no reason to believe it did, but Jimmy's brain was wired to allow for a continual string of maybe-this-times—logic be damned. And so what if it did have a coin in it—chump change. The coin wasn't the point. The point was that when he put his finger into the slot, there might *be* a coin in there. The fulfillment of the maybe—that was the point.

Jimmy had made it this far—three weeks from his twenty-fourth birthday—without being popped. Not once, not even juvie stuff. His record was as clean as his apartment, and you could perform surgery in there. He didn't get caught because he never left anything to chance. He planned to the last detail and checked—and rechecked—everything, way past the point of caution or reason.

Until now Jimmy had never taken on the big job—never taken a contract to dust anyone. Not out of faintness of heart or any jiggle of his moral compass—Jimmy's only true north was a dollar sign. But the big job always brought heat, and Jimmy definitely preferred a cool climate. If the big job was ever required, however, Jimmy knew just how he'd do it. He'd use the Glock, one to the body, one to the head, by the book. And he'd stay around until the close of business.

Jimmy stayed with second-layer stuff where the pay was good and nobody got all lathered up about things. He applied his skills like any craftsman. He studied and he planned. But as the most recent job had taught him, there are some things you just can't anticipate.

It should have been a walk in the park. He'd just been supposed to stick the guy up. Make it look like a routine robbery, something he did with regularity. Take the guy's watch, the diamond cufflinks, and the wallet. Jimmy would get the jewelry, whatever cash was in the wallet, plus his fee for the job. All he had to do was hand over the small white card with a list of numbers on it that was tucked inside the lining of the wallet. The guy was a short, overweight, pasty-faced accountant. If he'd had half a brain he wouldn't even have been hurt—not bad, anyway. He'd have had a doozy of a headache the next day and a lump the size of a golf ball on the back of his head—but he would have been alive. And he'd have been wise to the error of his ways, and very eager to make amends.

If the pitiful little toad hadn't decided to fight it out, if he hadn't thought he stood a chance of getting to the gun he had stashed in his glove compartment, Jimmy would never have shot him. Wouldn't have had his ski mask torn off by the flailing man, wouldn't have ended up chasing the bleeding man out into the street and up onto the front stoop to finish him off. Wouldn't have

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been spotted as he stood bathed in light from the street lamp outside the brownstone.

And after all that, he hadn't even gotten the card. Sometime during their tussle the guy's wallet had gone airborne. The little worm had pulled it out and run with it, like he was going to find a place to hide it or something. Like they were a couple of kids playing Keep Away! By the time Jimmy took care of him and started to look for the wallet, people were yelling and he could hear sirens coming closer, so he bolted. The wallet was probably sitting in the property room of the local precinct at this very moment. But it wouldn't be there for long, Jimmy knew that. Somebody on the inside would get the job of lifting it from there.

Jimmy's contact had told him that all was forgiven for the botched job, but he was watching his back just the same. The tension was activating a facial tic that made him blink in a series of three, then two, then three again, like some berserk Morse code.

He shifted from one foot to the other. If the old grayhead was talking, by this afternoon there could be flyers out all over the neighborhood with an artist's sketch of his face looking out at every person he'd ever ticked off. There were a few people around here—okay, more than a few—who would just love to see him with a can tied to his tail. Jimmy wasn't much of a people person. He started to make a mental inventory of everything he owned that he could turn into quick cash for a getaway. It didn't amount to much. He'd be lucky to get to Jersey.

He shrank back into the doorway and watched as the woman in the black coat emerged. "I've got to get to work, Mama," she called back over her shoulder. "I'll call you later today. We *really* need to have a long talk."

Just the daughter. He huffed a sigh of relief. There was still time to head this off. Jimmy knew one thing: Old people didn't usually want trouble. They liked being left alone, too; they were usually scared to get involved. Odds were pretty good that nothing had been reported. Not yet.

He looked down at his highly polished brown shoes and bent down to adjust the laces. This was only partly to avoid having the departing woman see his face. The laces *did* need his attention. They weren't tied evenly and Jimmy couldn't abide that. He retied them, careful that the loops were equal on either side. That done, he needed to move on quickly, get some other noises into his ears. Jimmy's auditory system couldn't tolerate voices in a certain register, usually carried by old ladies and sometimes by whiny young ones. It was almost as if his hearing were allergic to the sound. It made his head feel swollen and his neck muscles clench. He moved on down the street and turned the corner where the sooth-

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ing sounds of traffic, cursing taxi drivers, and blaring horns made him smile with relief.

"Now, Mama," Deborah said as they sat down at the dining room table that evening, cardboard cartons from the Chinese take-out aligned in a neat row beside plates, napkins, and silverware. Her mother fidgeted, looking for some task to perform. She finally settled on filling the water glasses. "Tell me how you've been doing," Deborah continued, trying to sidle up to the subject of the doll.

"I've been doing just lovely, dear," her mother replied. "I have so much to do, you know? Taking care of the apartment, and we play canasta now every other day. Plus, I help out at the Center two days a week now, did I tell you? So much to do." She spooned rice onto Deborah's plate and continued, "And I'm feeling well. A little touch of the arthritis, but that's to be expected." She flexed her hands and winced to demonstrate the pain the motion caused. "And how are you doing, Deborah? We haven't really talked in a while. Is your job going well? Are you seeing anyone?" For the last question her mother's voice went down half an octave and she leaned forward to await the answer.

"Ma, we have dinner together at least once a week. We talk plenty! And things haven't changed since last week. Yes, my job is going fine. And yes, I'm seeing someone—two or three someones—but no one special. I'll give you a heads up if a good marriage candidate enters my radar field, okay?"

"Sure, Deborah," her mother said, reaching over to push a stray strand of hair out of Deborah's face. "It'll happen, honey, don't be discouraged. I just meant—well, you *are* twenty-six years old."

Deborah slumped and cradled her forehead in her hand. "Ma, what am I? A piece of cheese nearing my expiration date? Listen to me. I'm in no hurry to get married. I like my life just the way it is. You understand?

"Yes, Deborah, I understand you," her mother said softly. "Do *you* understand me?"

Deborah looked at her mother, who returned her gaze with an iron stare. "Tell me, Mama," she said finally, heaving a sigh. "Tell me about the doll."

Her mother paused, smoothing the lace tablecloth over the edge of the table. "Again with the doll? Deborah, it's simple. I miss your father. You don't spend that many years together and not have a big hole in your life when they're gone. I miss having him to talk to. And that's all this is about. When Mrs. Leiberman told me about the woman who makes the dolls, I thought it would be a comfort to have it around, just to talk to. It makes me feel like a crazy old woman to talk to myself. Like I've got that All-the-timers."

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"Alzheimer's," Deborah corrected.

"And it's not like Shel ever chattered on or anything. He mostly just rustled the paper, or grunted," her mother continued, then smiled to herself, remembering. "But just the same, he was there."

"Mama," Deborah said, her voice melting, puddling the word out.

"Anyway," her mother went on, sitting erect, her words coming brisk, brooming away any emotional litter, "about that same time, I read in the paper that some women out in California were buying those blow-up dummies to put in the passenger seats of their cars, so it didn't look like they were driving alone. As a divergence to crime, you know?"

Deborah frowned and hesitated. "As a—oh, a deterrent?"

"Yes," her mother replied, rushing on, "so I figured it couldn't hurt for me to have another person silhouetted on those shades." She motioned to the dining room windows facing the street and paused. She stared at the shades for a moment, narrowing her eyes, then shook her head and went on. "So that was another good reason to have the doll made up. You can't be too careful, you know? Only last week a man was shot to death, right out there on that street. While I was sitting right here, having a cup of tea."

"Yes, Mama, I know that. I came over after it happened, remember? I was with you when the police were knocking on doors looking for witnesses. I wish you'd give some more thought to moving."

"Deborah, we've had this conversation, we've conversed it to death. I'm not going to reallocate. This is my home."

"Relocate," Deborah corrected automatically. "I just worry about you, that's all," she said, noticing for the first time the slight tremor in her mother's hand.

"You don't need to worry about me, honey," her mother said, starting to stack the empty food cartons. "I'm just hunky-dory. I like everything just the way it is. I don't want anything stirred up. I didn't tell you about the doll before because I figured you'd start to think your ol' Ma was a little moonstruck." She held up her hand like a crossing guard. "Which I am *not*. But I just didn't want to have to convince *you* of that. Who needs it? So I kept it to myself. Sometimes it's better just to dummy up, no joke intended there," she said, nodding her head toward the armoire.

"I don't think you're anything like that, Ma," Deborah said, "I just want you to be happy. I don't want you to shut yourself up in this house and be lonesome. And you know Pops wouldn't want that, either."

"I'm not doing that, Deborah. I'm really not. You can ask anyone. I'm even thinking of taking a cruise with the seniors group. One of my friends is going." She gathered cartons and dishes and rose. "I'm doing just wonderful. If you don't believe me, ask your father, I can go get him out of the armoire if you like."

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Deborah's head snapped in her mother's direction and she saw the sly grin on the old woman's face. "I'm just indirigible, aren't I?"

Deborah smiled and, yanking on her mother's lace-trimmed apron, said, "Incorrigible—you're definitely incorrigible."

"That's what I said!" replied her mother, balancing Deborah's Kung Pao Chicken container on top of the growing tower and hipping her way through the swinging door.

Getting in the front door of the brownstone was a piece of cake. The lock wouldn't have discouraged a seven-year-old with a pair of safety scissors. Jimmy had circled the building several times, checking for the telltale wiring of alarm systems. The inner door to the apartment he was interested in turned out to be more of a challenge. Old people were getting crafty. There were double deadbolts and, he suspected from what he could see in the tiny sliver of a crack underneath the door, a bar slide in the floor. He'd have to creep the place.

Under cover of night, the kitchen window turned out to be an open invitation. He didn't even need the glass cutter. The pane was so in need of glazing he was able to pry the whole thing out with a couple of twists of a screwdriver, then remove the security bars—which someone had put on from the outside. Jimmy loved stupid maintenance men!

Jimmy had an incredibly light touch—not a sound going in. He looked around the kitchen approvingly. Very neat, orderly—correct, except for the tray on the countertop by the coffee-maker. It held several bottles, a spiky potted plant, and two tiny cloisonné boxes. The arrangement was all wrong. Jimmy reached out to fix it, then caught himself. He wasn't here to feng shui. He was here to gather information, and maybe even go ahead and get the loose ends tied up.

He crept into the living room, catlike. He wore coverings over his shoes that his cousin Sonja had gotten him from the hospital where she worked—so he could protect his shoes from the grease when he worked on his motorcycle, he'd told her. He wore latex gloves, no finger or palm prints. And he wore a balaclava, not only to hide his face, but to make sure he didn't leave any forensic evidence, like hair. Jimmy knew about these things; he watched the Discovery Channel. He checked and rechecked his pathway to the window.

It would be an incredible stroke of luck if he could get this over with the first time in. Old people went to bed early. It was a reasonable hope. He crept silently up the stairs and paused at the top, listening hard. He heard the muted sounds of classical music coming from the room at the end of the hall on his right. The door was slightly ajar and a faint shaft of light fell in the hallway.

Jimmy eased down the hallway until he could see between the

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door and the jamb. The old woman sat up in bed, a book propped on a pillow in her lap, huge round glasses perched on her nose. Her wiry gray hair spilled down on her shoulders. Jimmy had been watching the place for four days now and had seen the old broad a half-dozen times. Now that she'd let her hair down out of that stranglehold of a bun, her skin had relaxed into a series of loose wrinkles. She looked like one of those Shar-Pei dogs. All loose skin. Jimmy shivered involuntarily.

He squinted through the slit and moved his head slightly, trying to get a fuller view of the room. The phone on the old woman's bedside table shrilled and she jumped. So did Jimmy! He flattened himself against the wall and calmed his breathing, listening.

"Oh, hello, Edith. No—no, I was just reading. What's on your mind? Oh, you don't say. Well, you want to hear something? You know what I got from Marge Styler? She said their daughter ran off with a cruise ship singer two days before her own wedding. . . ."

Jimmy clenched his teeth. The noise coming from the old ninny was making his head balloon and his neck was starting to stiffen. No way to do this now without bringing attention from the outside. And he couldn't risk that. And he couldn't wait around here all night, not with his head expanding and his neck starting to feel like some guy with a blowtorch was welding it in place.

He retraced his steps to the kitchen and slinked up onto the counter to make his exit. He was halfway out the window, one leg dangling down into the bushes, when he stopped. He hauled himself back in and scampered along the countertop to the tray. Tall things go in the back, everyone knew that! He arranged the tray in its proper configuration, tilted his head to admire it for a moment, then let himself out the way he had come in. He was careful to replace the glass and the bars at the window, just as he'd found them, sticking the pane back in place with tiny globs of insta-putty he carried in his gym bag, into which he now stuffed his surgical booties, his balaclava, the gloves, and the screwdriver.

Jimmy walked purposefully back out into the street. One more young guy returning from a late-night pilgrimage to the gym. One more seeker of buffdom. Jimmy knew how to blend in. So what if he had to go into the brownstone again. He knew the layout now. He knew which bedroom was occupied. He'd be back. Then it would be finished. No more loose ends.

Deborah was sitting at her desk trying to organize the mountain of paperwork she had to finish by Friday, when the auditors were scheduled to arrive. The accounting secretary, Alison, put her head around the door jamb.

"Deborah, your mother's on line one, she sounds a little upset."

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"Ma?" Deborah asked as she snatched up the phone. "You okay? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Deborah. Everything's okay. I'm fine, dear," came the answer, though she didn't sound fine in Deborah's ears. "It's just that, well, I have this feeling . . ." She paused.

In the silence Deborah felt pressure in her chest and realized she'd been holding her breath. "Ma," she said, letting it out, "what's the problem?"

"Well, you're going to think I'm hallucinogenic," her mother said, "but I think someone's been in the apartment."

"What do you mean you *think* someone's been in there?" Deborah asked, ignoring her mother's fractured syntax. "Do you think someone's in there *now,* Ma?"

"No, honey. I'm sure no one's in here just now."

"Well, are things missing? Has someone forced the locks?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I—well, you're going to think this is a silly thing—but my medicine tray was out of order this morning."

"Out of order?" Deborah asked. "What exactly does that mean—out of order?"

"Well, I always arrange it a certain way, you know. By how I take my pills—my vitamins, and herbs, and calcium—throughout the week, and it was all a mishmosh this morning. You didn't bother it last night, did you?"

"No, Ma," Deborah said, now relieved—and exasperated. "I didn't rearrange your tray. Are you so sure that it's in a different order?"

"Deborah Elaine!" her mother said sharply. "Think about who you're talking to! I know how I had my tray set up, and it's been moved. I'm very fastudious about these things."

Deborah sighed. *"Fastidious,"* she said. "Yes, yes, you are, Ma." It was true. If her mother said things were rearranged, odds are, they were! Now, what to do about it? Call the police and say, *My mother's apartment has been broken into. No, no, nothing's missing. No, no sign of forced entry. How do I know? Well, I know because her pill bottles are arranged in a different order than they were yesterday. Could you please send someone out to investigate this crime of the century?* She wondered if they'd bother to reply, or just hang up on her.

"Ma, make sure your doors are all locked and call Mrs. Leiberman to come over and sit with you for a while, okay? I'll be over right after work and we'll have another look around. You're sure everything is okay in the apartment now, right?"

"Yes, Deborah, everything but my tray."

"Yeah, aside from that," Deborah said as Alison came in to plop another pile of folders on the end of her desk. "Okay, I gotta go. I'll see you later. Everything'll be fine. Just relax."

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Jimmy lined up the apples in the wooden crate out front at the little greengrocer's so that all the stems pointed in the same direction. Mr. Kwan didn't like him to do that. He always seemed to think it was some elaborate scheme on Jimmy's part to steal one of them, but Jimmy didn't see how a person could stand to look at them all going this way and that. The oranges bothered him a little, but they didn't have stems, so he could teach himself to pretend that they were just balls, with no this-end-up about them.

Didn't that old bat ever leave her house? He'd been waiting here for two hours. It'd be good if he could get in while she was out. Have the element of surprise on his side. Loose ends just drove Jimmy crazy. He walked down to the coffee shop and ordered a cup of regular coffee to go, then stopped in the bathroom. The reason he needed to buy the coffee was so that he could use the bathroom. They were really picky about people using their facilities without buying something. And then, because he'd bought another cup of coffee, he'd soon be needing to come in and use the bathroom again. What a racket!

Just as he took up his perch again outside the greengrocer's the old lady came out the front door with another old hen. They were both bundled up and carried pocketbooks the size of suitcases. They trundled off down the street, both of them talking in that jet-engine whine. He could hear it from here, over the traffic and everything. Jeez! He shook his head to clear it.

They turned the corner. Jimmy picked up his gym bag and sprinted across the street, looked around, and slipped behind the brownstone. Daytime was risky, but he'd checked out all the windows that looked out onto the back of the brownstone and no one had a straight-on view. And he had a great friend in the form of this tall shrub by the kitchen window. He took out his telescoping mirror and used it to look around the kitchen. Then he took out the glass and then the bars again, just as he'd done before. He used the mirror to check that the kitchen was clear. Now for the split second it would take him to hoist himself up—and he was in.

He drew the blind to obscure the open windowpane and sat very still listening. Nothing. He crept around the kitchen wall and noticed, with considerable irritation, that the tray he'd arranged properly last night had been messed up again. *Keep your mind on your business, Jimmy! Loose ends!* he reminded himself. He looked out into the dining room, then crossed to the opposite wall and peered into the living room. All the furniture was covered with plastic and the magazines on the coffee table were laid out in a symmetrical fan. Jimmy stared at the arrangement for a long moment. He nodded his head as if blessing the room.

He listened again, then crossed to the dining room table, stood

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in the appropriate place, and looked out into the street. He needed to check. No use doing an unnecessary job. His heart sank. Loose ends, all right. The view was unobstructed and, with that streetlight where it was, he would have been lit up like he was on stage to sing an aria.

He eased over to the stairs and made his way up them, his back flattened against the wall. A painting in a gilt-edged frame hung on the landing at the top of the stairs. He gave it a scornful frown. Fruit in a bowl—very original. It was hanging about three degrees off kilter and Jimmy straightened it as he slipped past down the hall. He checked the bedrooms. Empty. He went into the bedroom where he'd seen the old lady reading and looked through the closets. Old guys' clothes, old guys' shoes, old women's clothes, junk jewelry. He was glad he wasn't here to burgle the place. Nothing here worth taking. He looked again at the old-man clothes. Where *was* the old codger? They must have one of those social rooms in the building, or maybe he was in someone else's apartment. The coffee had made its journey and Jimmy needed to use the bathroom again. He didn't dare risk a flush, suppose the front door opened at that time? Couldn't anything go right on this job? He squeezed his eyes shut and memorized the layout of the place, then made some calculations. Nighttime. Nighttime was better anyway. And he could do it clean and disappear into the dark.

No one had squealed on him yet. At least he didn't think so. He'd have heard on the street by now. But there was always the chance with old folks that they'd get all civic-minded. He had to follow through.

Jimmy made his way back down the hall, no longer bothering to creep. The painting he'd just straightened was hanging crooked again. Jeez! He took a tiny piece of insta-putty from his pocket and placed it under the bottom of the frame and pushed it against the wall. Now the sucker would hang right! One thing accomplished, anyway.

He made his exit, willing himself to leave the tray on the kitchen counter alone. If the old bat liked it that way, let her have it. Soon it wouldn't matter anymore.

Deborah threw her coat over a chair and dropped her shoulder bag on top of it. Her mother's admonitions—Hang things up as soon as you come in the door—rang in her ears, but she was too tired to care. The auditors had been there for two days—this one a *very* long one—laboring over the books. After they had pronounced them clean and healthy, the gang from accounting had all gone out for a late dinner. And the boss had given them tomorrow off. All she wanted now was a long hot bath and her flannel pajamas.

In the morning she'd need to go over early to check on her mother.

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This paranoia about break-ins was getting to be a real concern. The neighborhood had seemed safe enough, all things considered, until recently. That business with the man being killed in the street outside her apartment building had been unsettling. But the police had told Deborah they didn't think it was a random mugging. They had reason to believe that the man was involved in some high-stakes financial shenanigans with the "wrong people," as the cop put it, placing his finger beside his nose. He'd been moving money that wasn't supposed to move to a numbered account offshore. "I guess someone objected," the cop had said. "It's always good to be careful, and your mother should always take precautions, but I don't think this was a sign that the neighborhood's going to hell."

Still, her mother had been adamant that someone had been in the apartment again when she went to see her yesterday afternoon.

"Was your tray out of order again?" Deborah asked, trying to keep the scepticism out of her voice.

"Well, no, it was okay. It was the way I left it."

"Was anything missing or anything else out of place?"

"No, I couldn't see anything. But someone had been in here. I could just tell. The place felt different. I have good initiative about these things, you know that, Deborah."

"Intuition," Deborah amended. "Well, intuition or no, let's check through the apartment and see if we can find anything a little more concrete."

They walked through every room in the apartment, with Deborah checking in cupboards, under beds, and in drawers. Her mother's house was so exactly arranged and organized that anything out of place would be instantly apparent. Nothing.

"Well, Ma, just make sure you lock all the doors and keep your phone right by the bed. If you hear anything, anything at all, you call nine-one-one right away, then call me. Okay?"

Deborah didn't believe her mother was in any danger. Everything looked perfectly normal. But she appreciated how much the recent crime had upset her and she knew, despite her mother's protests, that she wasn't adjusting well to being alone. She wished she could get her to reconsider moving to another building with more security. But her mother wouldn't even entertain the idea.

She was luxuriating in a deep tub of lilac-spiked hot water when the telephone jangled in the other room. She focused on her watch on the bathroom counter. Eighteen minutes past midnight. Who'd be calling her at this hour? She thought of her mother and sprang from the tub, grabbing a towel and wrapping it hastily around her, dripping water and lilac bubbles over her hardwood floors as she sprinted out to the phone.

"Deborah, come over, please," her mother's voice, sounding strangely mechanical, warbled over the wire.

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"Ma, are you okay? What's happened?" she asked.

"I—he—I . . . Don't ask! Just come over, Deborah," she said, and the line went dead.

When Deborah arrived, her mother was in the kitchen. A young man dressed in sweat clothes was sitting in one of her kitchen chairs—no, that wasn't quite right—was *tied* to one of her kitchen chairs with four or five pairs of support hose. Two police officers were there, a male and a female. The male was taking notes in a little notepad as her mother bustled about making coffee.

"What in the world is going on here?" Deborah shouted.

"Do you have to yell?" the young man tied to the chair asked, bobbing his head back and forth in misery and blinking his red eyes.

"I told you, you've got the right to remain silent," said the female cop. "Now why don't you just exercise it?"

The male cop was tall, older, and fit. He obviously hadn't fallen victim to the doughnut epidemic. He stopped scribbling and aimed his ballpoint at the window. "This young gentleman came in to see your ma without a proper invitation. Came in through that window there. Your mother here," he gestured toward her, "pepper-sprayed him and cold-cocked him with a sock full of quarters. Then she tied him up, doctored his eyes, and called us."

"She WHAT?" Deborah exclaimed.

Jimmy had been watching the place for over an hour when he saw the old woman come into the dining room and bend down to plant a kiss on the old guy's head and gesture toward the stairs. *Toddling off to bed, good night, dear.* He picked up his bag and scooted behind the building. If he went in quiet, he could have this done and be gone before the old woman could even get her feet on the floor. He peered up over the kitchen window ledge. He couldn't believe his luck. The swinging doors to the dining room were open. It was a clear shot.

Now he was getting a preview of hell. The old woman had ambushed him coming in. She'd been sitting there in the dark, pepper spray in one hand and a homemade sap in the other. She'd let him have it just as he took aim and fired. And all because of that stupid piece-of-crap crooked painting. If he'd let the thing alone, she'd never have gotten on to him. She'd been in the habit, she told the cops, of straightening the picture every morning when she came down for breakfast. And as she tramped up and down the stairs during the day, it slowly leaned all akimbo again by nightfall. What kind of person would put up with that? Jimmy couldn't understand it. She'd found the putty when she'd gone to straighten it this morning and that had set her off on her own little Miss Marple tour of her apartment. Who'd ever have imagined

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she'd spot the tiny pieces of putty in the window. They were so small, and he'd applied them so neatly. If he hadn't used the putty . . .

Jimmy was blinking his eyes furiously, trying to clear the pepper spray. He had come to tied to the chair by a tangled web of old-lady stockings. The old broad had him by the chin and was squirting eye drops in each eye as he thrashed around in the chair. She held his eyelids open and flooded them with water, none too gently, all the while telling him it was more than he deserved. His eyes still felt like lit cherry bombs. He needed to get his vision clear. He could have sworn he'd hit his target. Why wasn't she telling the cops about that? Why wasn't she doing something?

And all the while, she'd been talking in that voice. And now the daughter was doubling her. Hell in stereo. His head throbbed where she'd whacked him, his face felt like it was on fire, and now the two of them wouldn't shut up.

"He was going to rob me," the old woman was screeching.

"Lady, you ain't got nothing worth stealing in this place," Jimmy responded before he could stop himself. He willed himself to stay calm and said in a low voice, almost pleadingly, "Stop talking, just stop talking."

"And maybe rape me, too," the old hag went on.

"Not on my darkest day," Jimmy shouted back, then winced as the pain of the effort ping-ponged inside his skull. Rape her? The thought triggered his gag reflex.

The woman cop had put cuffs on him and was now untying his hands, though his feet were still bound to the chair. "Behave yourself," she told him. "And I warn you again, you might want to keep your mouth shut."

Jimmy pushed his feet on the floor tiles and inched the chair back until he could see into the dining room, if only he could get his eyes clear enough to focus. Yes, there he was, lying on the floor, the gray hair just visible behind the legs of the dining room chair. Why wasn't the old woman doing anything to help him?

"And just look at this, would you, Deborah?" she was rasping, her voice now sounding like a thousand fingernails on a thousand blackboards in Jimmy's ears. "Somebody put these bars in backwards. Probably our nincompoop Super, Mr. Cervalles." She stopped to suck in a breath, then pointed to Jimmy. "He might have killed me in my sleep. Raped me, then killed me. What kind of a divergence to crime is that?" she asked, gesturing her flabby arm toward the window, looking like some giant geriatric version of a flying squirrel.

Divergence! That wasn't even the right word. Jimmy's head now felt twice the size of his body and his neck muscles were locked and loaded in the put-me-out-of-my-misery position. She was talking in that leaf-shredder voice—and now she wasn't even using

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the right words. A strangled protest spewed out of him. "I wasn't even after you, you stupid old cow. I was after the guy!" He half stood, his hands cuffed behind him. His face was red and his voice strained. "It was the old fart. He's the one who saw me!" He jerked his head, with considerable effort, toward the dining room, then shook his head back and forth like a dog with a rag, trying to unknot his neck muscles. He could feel the foam at the corners of his mouth and realized suddenly that there were more and more loose ends, and that now he was creating them himself. Everything was coming unraveled.

"Everybody stop talking, just stop talking!" He slumped back into his chair and let out a few frustrated whimpers. He was caught, and the old guy might be in there dying while she bumped her gums. He'd be facing murder one. He blinked his bloodshot eyes at the female cop. "Check on the old man. I fired, but I don't know . . . " His voice trailed off and he closed his eyes tight. Through lips drawn tight across his teeth, he hissed, "Just check on him." As they all looked at one another in confusion, Jimmy opened his eyes, which had taken on the vacant stare of surrender. They bobbed along until they came to rest on the tray on the countertop. "And for God's sake, fix that! Please! Everybody knows the tall things go in the back," he said and groaned.

Deborah had seen the cops sneaking sidelong glances at one another as she'd explained, as best she could, about the Shelton doll. She'd gone with the male cop into the dining room, where they had found the doll with a "through-and-through" in his head, bits of stuffing clumped around the exit wound. Throughout her explanation, Jimmy sat rocking back and forth, keening and repeating, "A dummy, a dummy, popped for a dummy," like a mantra.

Her mother had sat calmly sipping her coffee and steadfastly refusing to look at the officers, or at her daughter, as she told them about her mother's reasons for having the doll made and how she made a habit of having meals with him sitting at his customary place. Deborah saw her mother sitting up straighter and fidgeting more with her clothing or her hair with every new detail her daughter provided. She knew she was robbing her mother of her dignity, but she wanted her out of the middle of whatever mess this Jimmy character had dragged her into when he'd decided to do his dirty business right in front of her apartment building.

The male cop stage-whispered to his partner as they marched Jimmy out of the apartment, "This is one for the books, the perp and the victim are *both* dummies." They chuckled discreetly and Jimmy, completely morose, but still Jimmy, reached out a foot to straighten the rug by the front door as they took him away.

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Now they were all gone and she was alone with her mother. She came up behind her where she stood at the kitchen sink and placed her hands gently on her shoulders. "I had to tell them about it, Ma. I'm really sorry if it embarrassed you."

"That's all right, Deborah," her mother said, busying herself scrubbing the coffee cups in a sink generous with suds. She worked on them industriously for a few moments, then stopped abruptly. "Actually, Deborah, I have a question for you," she said as she dried her hands on a dishtowel, slowly and deliberately. "Do you think it's technicality correct to say that it's not making a false statement to the police if you don't say anything?" her mother asked finally, flipping her hands palms up, then palms down to navigate her way through the upside-down question.

"A false statement? Ma, you didn't make a false statement, *technically* or otherwise!"

"I know I didn't, dear. That's what I'm saying. You did all the talking. I just didn't argue with you."

"Well, why would you argue with me?" Deborah asked with a nervous laugh. "Did I get something wrong about the doll?"

"Oh no, not at all, honey," her mother said, reaching over to pat her cheeks. Deborah blinked as she got a whiff of lemon-scented Palmolive liquid. "You did a fine job of explaining the Shelton doll and all that business. It's just that . . ." Her voice trailed off as she began to twist the dishcloth in her hands. "Deborah, do you remember Mr. Feldman? He and Trudy—Mrs. Feldman, God rest her soul—they used to play canasta with your father and me and some other couples in the neighborhood?"

A tiny trench of thought formed between Deborah's eyebrows as she conjured up a picture of Mr. Feldman. He was a short, round man who always had a strange little smile on his face, as though he was thinking pleasant thoughts—that, or indulging in some fairly powerful narcotics. He wore Mr. Peepers glasses, magnifying his pupils to fun-house size.

"Well, yes, Ma. I know Mr. Feldman." She swiped criss-crossed hands in front of her face as if to refresh her mental screen. "What does this have to do with the police, or the statement, or the doll, or that psycho who broke in here—any of it?"

Her mother tilted her head to one side as if trying to hear distant music, ignoring Deborah's agitation. "Mr. Feldman is a very nice man, you know," she replied finally. "He lives up in 4B still."

Deborah extended both hands and opened her mouth, producing a chuff of impatience. "Yes, I know that, Ma. I see him sometimes when I come to visit." In fact, Deborah had run into Mr. Feldman last week when she'd come to borrow her mother's rice steamer. She remembered exchanging hello-how-are-yous on the front stoop. Whenever Deborah saw Mr. Feldman she was always

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reminded of a toy her cousin Rhonda's little girl played with. It was a tabletop contraption that featured a disembodied plastic head and a lever. Little Vicky would put a big glob of playdough into a tiny compartment and pump the lever and spikes and strings of playdough hair were squeezed up through holes in the head. Then she'd trim the hair with scissors, or squish it into different styles. Except Mr. Feldman seemed to have a clog somewhere, and the hair that was intended for the head was being diverted—squeezed out in the form of ear hair, nose hair, a shaggy beard, and antennae-like eyebrows. The top of his little gnome head remained smooth and shiny, while the rest bristled.

"I'm sure you're right," Deborah said now, slumping into a kitchen chair. "I'm sure Mr. Feldman is a perfectly nice man. But can we get back to this thing about the police, Ma? I told them just what you told me about the doll and all. Why are you talking about what's a false statement and what's not?"

"You said it was the doll, the doll of Shelton that Jimmy person was after. That the doll was sitting at the dining room table the night of the shooting."

"Yeah," Deborah answered. "That was why he broke in here. He thought Pops saw him gun that man down, you heard him. Only, obviously, Pops is a little beyond witnessing anything." Deborah laughed softly and gestured toward the ceiling, and, by extension, heavenward. "Or if he did, he's beyond making a statement. And his stand-in—while I grant you it is very accurate—" she said, holding up a hand to quell her mother's argument, "it doesn't exactly have twenty-twenty vision."

"Actually, Deborah," her mother said, drawing out the words, "your father was in the armoire that night." She paused, tilted her head downward, and gave Deborah a meaningful look. "All night."

Deborah arched her eyebrows—a silent question.

Her mother continued, "But the person who was sitting there doesn't have twenty-twenty, either. Not even close," she said, fanning the dishtowel. "He can barely see his hand in front of his face. I mean, have you ever seen those thick glasses of his? He wasn't a witness, either. Not by a long shot. So I don't see any reason to complicate things by getting the police involved in our private business."

Deborah made several attempts to formulate a question, but could only form the initial "Wh—" She sounded like a helicopter hovering in her mother's kitchen. "Wh—Wh—Wh—"

"Mr. Feldman," her mother said, hanging the dishtowel over the handle of the oven and spreading it evenly. "Well, him and me have been," she paused and searched the air for a term, "we've been *keeping company* lately." She put a hand to her forehead and rested a fist on her ample hip. "I just cannot believe I forgot to pull

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the shades that night. I've always been so careful when Mr. Feldman comes over to—" she paused again and cast a sidelong look at Deborah, her cheeks turning rosy pink—"to socialize," she concluded. "Imagine what Mrs. Leiberman—or, God forbid, Edith—would do with this. Mr. Feldman and I would like to have our confidentiality. And Edith is, you'll pardon the expression, a number-one gossipmonger!"

The thought of her mother *socializing* with round, hairy little Mr. Feldman made Deborah grimace. "Ma, what are you talking about?" Deborah demanded, then gave a little gasp and clapped her hands over her ears. "No, don't tell me. This is too much information." She pressed her hands tighter and bent over in her chair. "Way too much information."

"That's right, honey," her mother said, rubbing her shoulders. "It'll take time. I really don't think you're ready."

Deborah's mother paid meticulous attention to her packing. The bun was gone in favor of a short, styled coif. The housedress replaced by a snappy new wind suit.

"Ma, are you sure about this?" Deborah asked, not for the first time.

"Very sure, Deborah. I'm looking forward to this cruise. I've never been anyplace like this. The Cayman Islands. It sounds so exotic. Edith would positively die if she knew about this. But Mr. Feldman and I have been the soul of deception."

"Soul of *discretion.*" Deborah smiled. "I'm glad you're happy, Ma, and I hope you have a wonderful time." She rose from the edge of the bed and kissed her mother on her rouged cheek. "Call me the minute you get home. I want to hear all about your trip." She scrunched her eyes shut. "Well, maybe not all of it, but most of it . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I know, Deborah," her mother said, patting her daughter's cheeks. "Honey, not to worry. I'll call you the minute I get in. I'll see you in two weeks."

Deborah gave one last backward glance as she left the bedroom and tried to picture her mother and Mr. Feldman playing shuffleboard, *JUST* shuffleboard, aboard the cruise ship.

When she heard the front door close, Deborah's mother went to the closet and brought out the Shelton doll. The hole had been neatly patched and she smoothed the hair over it and sat the doll in the side chair by the window, placing a newspaper on its lap.

"She's trying, Shel. But she's going to need more time." She laughed softly and patted the doll's canvas hand, then went back to her packing.

"I could have told her that I didn't misspeak that time. I meant

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just what I said. Mr. Feldman—Aaron—and I *have* been the soul of deception. But she's had so many things to adjust to lately. I don't think she needs to hear all the details. But I could always tell you everything, Shelton."

She sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, still folding things into her suitcase. "That night when that poor man was shot, Aaron was sitting at our table, just like old times when we all used to get together, you know? Except that you and Trudy and some of the others are gone. I was having a cup of tea and he was having some wine. We heard the shot, but we thought it was just a car backfiring. What do we know from gunshot sounds? Anyway, we were listening to music on the phonograph. Then Aaron decided to go up to his place and bring down a record he wanted me to hear. A Mendelssohn, I think it was. But that's neither here nor there." She shooed the issue away with a fan of her hand.

"So, when he started up the stairs he saw a little piece of white paper stuck under the front door. He thought maybe somebody dropped it when they were getting their key or something. He picked it up and looked at it, then stuck it into his watch pocket and continued on his way. He intended to tack it up on the bulletin board by the mailboxes the next day. He was still up in his apartment looking for the record when the police came to question us all."

She sighed, leaning her head to one side as she gazed at the doll. "You know, Shelton, I miss you terribly, but Deborah's right. I have to get on with my life. I know that's what you'd want."

She got up to fold a new dress she'd bought for the Captain's dinner into tissue paper and placed it carefully into her suitcase. "You remember, Aaron was a CPA for a lot of years. He understood right away what the little white card was, after the police talked to him." A smile of satisfaction crept across her face. "And he understood right away what it can mean for a *very* comfortable retirement. That's why we're going on this cruise. This specific cruise. To the Cayman Islands, where there are some very specific banks. He's found out what he needs to know and he says one of our stops will feature something lush and green—ripe and ready for the picking." She did a little cha-cha step in place.

"Do you know what he asked me yesterday?" she queried the doll, her voice playful. "He said, 'What do you think—Europe next summer?' Europe next summer! 'What's to think about?' I said. Can you imagine?" she asked, her smile fading as she walked over and picked up the doll, giving it a squeeze. She smoothed the hair again.

"Aaron isn't you, Shelton, I know that. He's short, overweight, bald, and wears coke-bottle glasses." She danced the doll across the floor and put it gently into the closet. She closed the door and put her back to it, leaning in until she heard a click of finality. "But a dummy, he's not!" ●

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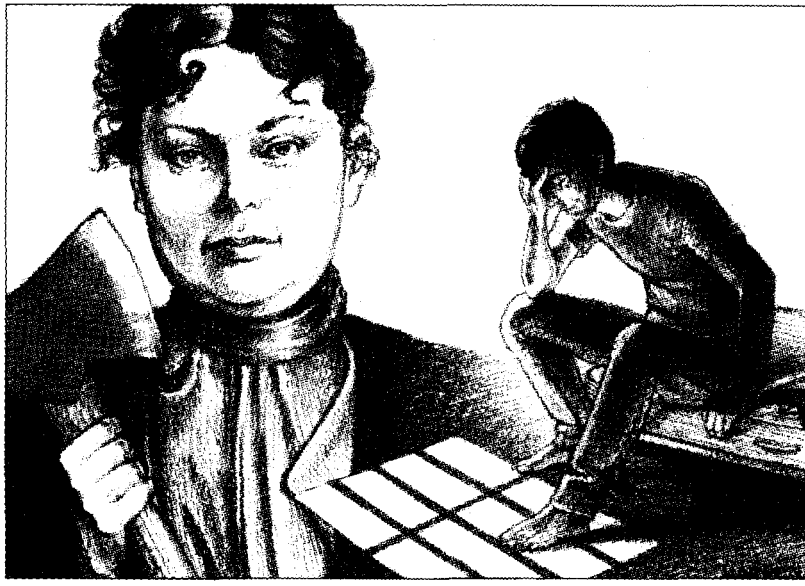

Art by Laurie Harden

DISNEY WORLD

by Michael Collins

The house had changed since the time of the murders. The house, the street, the city, the state, the country, and the world had all changed. Only the public hadn't changed. The public never changes. (George Washington once said, "The Public, when left to themselves, are unfit for their own government." Or something like that.) Lizzie Andrew Borden had been acquitted of the brutal murders of her autocratic, penurious father and stepmother one day in 1892, but everyone *knew* she'd done it, then and now. Frederick Stewart hadn't even gone on trial, but everyone *knew* he had shot his wife four days ago in the same room where Lizzie had axed her stepmother.

In Fall River, Massachusetts, 92 Second Street was, and is, a Greek Revival house behind a white picket fence, with shutters and a recessed front entrance. There are three narrow stories of simple clapboard, with a peaked roof and almost no decoration. There are no turrets, gables, dormers, or any other Victorian filagree. From my rented Buick, it looked like a beige box with rudimentary dark brown trim, its windows reflecting the setting Indian summer sun like

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three rows of blood-red eyes.

Built in 1845, and sold to others twenty years after the murders, it had been restored as closely as possible to the way it was in 1892, and was now a bed-and-breakfast for daring travelers, a thrill for touring Nebraskans and Japanese who studied their guidebooks as they walked through, took pictures, bought postcards and souvenirs, and hurried back to the bus to be driven on to Salem, or to the Edgar Allan Poe house in nearby Providence, Rhode Island.

Real crimes and their legends often enter into crime fiction. Michael Collins takes up the Lizzie Borden murders in his new story, but his treatment is unusual: He uses the historical case to illuminate the present, while letting the present give us a new interpretation of the past. Like his long-running series character Dan Fortune, Collins has "an off-center view of today's world." ✝

And in my head I suddenly heard the screams of the older murders echoing inside, and heard the frustrated voice of the lawyer defending the man accused of the new murder, Fred Stewart of Morristown, N.J.

"He won't talk to me," Saul Jenkins said. "Not a damn word. He won't talk to his parents or hers. He won't even talk to his bosses. Go up there, Dan, look at the house, check out the police story of how it happened. Find me a flaw in their case."

"They won't like an outside private snooper, Saul. They'll make it hard as hell on you at the trial."

Saul studied his fingertips and sighed. "How much harder can they make it? The media are having a field day. Every night the jokes. Letterman: *'Freddie Stewart had a gun, thought he'd have a little fun. When his wife lay down her head, whipped out the gun and shot her dead.'* Leno: *'Lizzie Borden took an axe, gave her father forty whacks,* right? Hey, not for this Stewart guy. *Pow,* four through the heart with a forty-four Magnum. End of story, right?'" Saul let out an even longer sigh. "And Fred Stewart won't talk to me."

White-haired now, Saul's still the best, and most expensive, criminal lawyer in New York, if not the most famous. He swiveled in his chair, the heavy evening light of a New York August outside his windows, and shook his head. "Stewart's not your run-of-the-mill killer, Dan, and his wife's not the usual victim. No police record anywhere for either of them. Not a hint of violence, gun or anything else, including domestic battles. Total straight arrows. She was high up in a New Jersey company, and he's on Wall Street—"

"A trader? High flier?"

"Accountant. Social drinker, doesn't smoke, doesn't gamble. His

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firm values him so much they're footing my bill. They want him back. But he won't talk." Another long sigh. "There are moments I think he likes being where he is, likes it alone in an eight-by-eight cell."

"Is he guilty, Saul?"

"I don't know," Jenkins admitted, "but it looks like it. The problem is why? From everything I've heard, it doesn't make sense. There's no motive."

"The Massachusetts cops don't have a motive?"

"Not one they've told me yet."

"Maybe there isn't one," I said. "Maybe he didn't do it. Tell me about the gun. Where'd he get it?"

"It was his. Or theirs. They're licensed to have it in the car and at home."

"Why?"

"Find out." He leaned forward, earnest. "Chase all the angles, Dan. The gun, the motive. Talk to everyone. Go up there. Hell, you know how to do it. Find something I can use to defend him. Or at least to make a deal with."

According to the Massachusetts police, the facts were plain enough: Stewart, 33, and his wife Stephanie, 32, were on a vacation trip through New England. They had done Ticonderoga and Ethan Allen, Mount Washington, New Bedford, and were on their way to Salem and Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables, when they stopped for the night at the bed-and-breakfast, where they had reservations.

Because the 1892 murders had occurred on August fourth, it was the time of the reenactments, and the place was full. Three of the actors stayed late to celebrate with the staff member on duty. About one A.M., they and the other guests heard gunshots from the second-floor guest room where the Stewarts were staying. When they got to the room, it was locked inside with the deadbolt. They broke down the door. Fred was sitting on the floor, a 9mm Glock in his hand. (No .44 Magnum, that was just Leno's comic license.) Stephanie was dead on the bed in a pool of blood.

The police interrogated Fred for five hours. He looked into space the whole five hours. They booked him, and locked him up. In the morning a judge assigned him a public defender, he was indicted for first-degree murder, and the families were notified. The brokerage where Fred worked hired Saul Jenkins the same day.

The day after that, Saul called me out in California.

I'd done work for him in my New York days. He admired my "ingenuity." By which he meant my off-center view of today's world, and willingness to annoy the police by digging in corners. He was grasping at straws.

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My first stop was Thayer, Fahrney, and Levenger. The brokerage occupied three floors on Exchange Place south of Wall Street. The receptionist who ushered me over pale blue carpeting so deep my shoes disappeared was the perfect symbol of twenty-first century stock brokerage: spectacular face and body that would make any male under ninety reckless, encased in a reserved demeanor and a demure knit dress that covered her from knee to throat but left nothing to the imagination. Mr. Delbert Dantini was the male version of the same image: The jacket of his five thousand dollar gray suit flung carelessly over the arm of his high-back desk chair, and his pants held up by bright red braces. Bold, exhilarating, risk-taking, but basically responsible. I asked him about the image.

He laughed. "A few years ago if you gave them a return of fifteen, twenty percent a year they sent you a case of Johnny Walker Blue at Christmas. Now they want twenty percent in a week, or a day, and they want you to tell them to bail out in time when the IPO goes into cardiac arrest." He shook his head wearily. "That's not always possible, and then they want your blood. It's a crazy life."

"Fred Stewart isn't on that roller coaster?"

"Fred's idea of a wild ride is half-a-cent-a-point bridge with his next-door neighbors, or driving down for a full month at Disney World in Orlando," Dantini said. "What Fred does is massage numbers so they always come out right on the books and for the IRS. Best accountant we ever had."

"What does 'best' mean?"

He smiled. "Not what you're thinking. Fred makes sure anything we do is at least legal, even if that costs some of us half the year's bonus."

"That might have made him unpopular."

"Only with those stupid enough to want to go to prison, and we don't hire people that stupid. This is a risk-taking firm, not a bucket shop. Besides, it wasn't Fred who was shot, was it?"

"Shooters can miss," I said. "Did he handle a lot of money? Carry it around? Take it home?"

Dantini studied his ceiling. "You're talking about his gun. No, we don't do business in cash." He fidgeted with a pencil. "Okay, we helped him get the gun some years ago by saying he often took negotiable bonds home in his car. It was a favor."

"Why did he want a gun?"

"Personal protection."

"What about women? Most of the women I've seen in this office are young and very nice to look at."

"All of them. Trading's a young person's game these days, and sex never hurts. I'm thirty-eight, and except for the senior partners, I'm the old man in the office."

"A lot of temptation."

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"And most of us succumb," he agreed. "Men and women."

"But not Fred Stewart?"

"He's been married to his wife for ten years, and he still brings her to every company function. If I ever saw a solid marriage, that was it." He stood, the interview over. "We want him back, Mr. Fortune."

"Even after he murdered his wife?"

"We don't believe he did. It's not possible. That's why we hired Mr. Jenkins."

Back in 1892, the Borden house had been surrounded by other homes, mostly larger and grander—Andrew Borden, certainly the wealthiest man on the street, saw no reason to indulge his wife and daughters in unnecessary comfort. Now the street was commercial, and a printing shop built abutting the house had been turned into the bed-and-breakfast's office and gift shop. When I entered, I felt I'd actually stepped back into the nineteenth century. A woman wearing a period blouse and skirt with a fringed shawl and her hair pulled back in a tight bun, much like the photos we have of Lizzie, greeted me sadly. "I'm sorry, sir, but we're full, and will be for months. All the publicity, I guess. I can refer you to a nice place nearby, and maybe a tour spot will open and—"

"Leno and Letterman and all the axe jokes?"

"Isn't it amazing? Everyone wants to stay here now."

"Not me." I flashed my credentials. "Dan Fortune. It's about the new murder. I didn't get your name."

"Norma, and I better get Martha for you. She's the owner." She buzzed.

A woman in normal street clothes appeared in the office through what I guessed was the entrance into the house. Martha wasn't exactly pleased to see me, and I couldn't blame her. The second-floor room where both old and new crimes had happened was still a taped crime scene at a time when they were mobbed by curious thrill seekers and needed every room, and a detective snooping around could disturb the guests. Illusion was one thing, an actual detective was another. But she was a good citizen, and a real tragedy had happened in her house.

"Of course, Mr. Fortune. Look anywhere you want. Ask us anything you want, we're glad to cooperate. That poor woman."

Tours were over for the day, but the overnight guests had begun to arrive, and were being shown to their rooms or suites. Before they reappeared to swarm over the place, I walked through the old rooms trying to get the "feel" of what might have happened on the night of the more recent murder of Stephanie Stewart. The furniture, wallpaper, and carpeting patterns eerily duplicated descriptions I'd read of the rooms where Andrew and Abby Borden had been murdered a century ago.

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I found nothing that rang even a faint bell in my mind that the police hadn't, and when I returned to the first floor the overnight guests were already milling around, eager to begin their tours and anticipating their daring night ahead.

"I guess you could say I'm Fred's closest friend in the office. He even had me out to parties at his house a few times."

His name was Greg. Thirty-five, tall and slim, well-dressed, wearing glasses, and uneasy where he sat in his cubicle at Thayer, Fahrney, and Levenger, one eye on the monitor screen where stock prices kept scrolling and changing.

"What kind of parties?"

"Dinner. Drinks. The usual. He's got a great game room in the basement with a wet bar and everything. The guys and some gals would play pool, shoot darts after dinner. If there was a big game on TV the guys'd watch while the gals played bridge. In the summer, basketball in the backyard for the guys. Good beer and wine, and Stephanie's a great cook." For a moment he turned pale, as if he was the one who'd been shot. "*Was,* I guess. God, it's unbelievable."

"Single women at the parties?"

"Not when I went. Wives only. Husbands, too. That's one reason I started turning down his invitations. I'm still single, and I don't want to be forever."

"What're the other reasons?"

"Oh, I got busy. And everyone at Fred's parties knows each other. They were all neighbors or old friends. No strangers except me. By the end of the evening all the same people drunk, all the same people flirting, but everyone going home with their spouses, you know? It started to feel funny. I mean, like some kind of game they all played house to house." He shrugged. "Besides, he stopped asking me. Said he didn't think I was having fun. What could I say? He was right."

While all the guests were downstairs, I slipped under the crime-scene tape and opened the door into the room where Abby Borden and Stephanie Stewart had died. There was the same single radiator for heat there had been in Lizzie's day. Back then, windows had been the only ventilation. Now it had central air conditioning. Modern guests need more comfort.

The bed was an authentic Victorian double with carved head and footboards. The sheets and covers had been taken by the police, but the four bullet holes in the center of the wide stain of blood were still in the mattress. The bullets had been dug out from the back, or had gone through into the floor. There was another stain of blood on the flowered carpeting where Fred Stewart had been found sitting silent, the gun in his hand, his knees drawn up

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to his chin. I looked for any other bloodstains on the floor that could indicate someone else had dropped the gun and Fred Stewart stupidly picked it up. I found nothing.

The broken deadbolt on the door told its story—no one could have entered by the door. There were three windows covered with lace curtains and interior wooden shutters. I opened the shutters, pushed back the curtains, and checked the window locks. They were intact, and locked. The ground was two stories below, with no fire escape, drain pipe, tree limb, or ladder in sight. The shooter could have climbed up to the top of the steep roof, lowered himself, and climbed in the window, but that would have taken a professional, which so far seemed unlikely.

It wasn't impossible, but a two-story ladder would have to have been removed within seconds of the shooting, or an incredibly fast escape made in silence over the steep roof. And lying in bed as she had been, all four shots going through her and into the mattress and floor, Stephanie couldn't have been shot from the window.

The more I looked around that room, the more it seemed that only Fred Stewart could have shot his wife.

Out in New Jersey, the Stewarts lived in a two-story, four-bedroom, four-bath white frame house in Morristown. It was a large house in a neighborhood of similar houses built in the thirties for middle-class families from Manhattan moving up in the world. It cost maybe $10,000 then. It would cost a million now, give or take, but the people who lived here would be the same. There was a lawn and flower beds in front, and a small yard and three-car garage in back, with a basketball backboard over the garage door. Inside the garage I saw a two-year-old Lexus. The car they'd driven through New England had been a new Mercedes.

A matronly woman with reddened eyes, wearing a black dress and a distraught face, answered the door. I told her who I was and why I was there. She told me she was Mrs. Julia Stewart, Fred Stewart's mother, and invited me into a pleasant living room of expensive department-store modern furniture. Simple geometric lines and solid color fabrics with wood trim and some glass, but the original Bauhaus daring had been totally copied out. Cookie-cutter furniture.

Mrs. Stewart sat me on a beige couch and introduced a couple sitting in two beige armchairs that matched the couch as Josip and Smilia Ujcic, Stephanie's parents. Josip Ujcic gave me a belligerent stare, and his wife had the same tear-reddened eyes as Julia Stewart. "Ten years," Josip Ujcic glared. "That's how long they been married. No problems."

"None of us can think of any possible reason for Fred to do such a terrible thing, Mr. Fortune," Julia Stewart explained.

No problems, that was the mantra. Fred Stewart couldn't have

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shot Stephanie Ujcic, because they had no problems. I had to drag every detail out of them.

Fred and Stephanie lived in Morristown because the printing and publishing company where she was the comptroller was located there. Fred rode the Erie Lackawanna to his job at Thayer, Fahrney, and Levenger. Both their jobs paid well, with Steph making as much or more than Fred. That was no problem.

They had no children, no debts beyond their mortgage, and a small circle of friends with the same kinds of jobs, the same solid income, and the same big houses. They exchanged dinner parties, played bridge, shared television shows, and generally visited with these friends, and took a month-long vacation every year.

Fred had grown up in nearby Maplewood. His late father, a mechanic turned small manufacturer, had moved the family out of Jersey City in the early sixties. Fred did well in the suburban high school, and played second base on the baseball team. He graduated from Rutgers, where he was too small for baseball, with a math major and took an MBA at NYU's business school. Stephanie, from Ohio, where Josip Ujcic still worked as a telephone repairman, graduated from Ohio State and got her MBA on scholarship from the Ivy League Wharton School of Business at Penn. This academic discrepancy had been no problem.

They met at a party one weekend when Stephanie lived in New York, and were married less than six months after each graduated and went to work for their respective companies. Ten years ago, starting salaries, even for MBAs, weren't high enough to afford an apartment in a good neighborhood in Manhattan, and no one in their right mind wanted to live in Manhattan with its prices, crime, dirt, bad schools, and worse parking, anyway. Renting was a waste of money, so his parents advanced them the down payment and they bought the house in Morristown.

"They had such a big, beautiful wedding," Julia Stewart told me, wiping a tear.

Mrs. Ujcic joined in. "They loved it."

"We brought them up right, both families," Josip Ujcic told me defiantly. "Good jobs, good house, good neighborhood. They were good, solid kids. We taught them right. They deserved the best."

"They had everything we ever had, and more," Julia Stewart and the Ujcics told me. "Even a whole month vacation every year. We didn't go to Disneyland until we were in our fifties."

"Why no kids?"

"They had plenty of time," Josip Ujcic declared, and his wife started to cry. He broke down then. "She ... she ... was only thirty-two."

Sooner or later all detectives hear a small but relentless voice inside their head, that, after eyes and ears and nose have seen and

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heard and smelled and sorted out, starts to speak. Mine was talking to me now. At least a whisper. I couldn't, or wouldn't, put a label on what it was whispering, not yet, but I could hear it saying what, perhaps, I didn't want to hear, but heard, and saw a hazy picture emerging. More the outline of a picture, a shape rising from the sudden, unexplainable, impossible death of Stephanie Stewart.

Three of the staff who'd performed in the reenactment, Dave the night manager, and a local woman named Donna who'd attended the reenactments every year since 1996 had still been there when the shots were heard. I talked to them outside the dining room, where the current guests were munching on snacks and still analyzing the old murders.

"Think about that night. Anything you didn't remember to tell the police, or they didn't ask about, or you only now remember?"

"We told the police and your lawyer everything, Mr. Fortune," the owner, Martha, insisted.

"Think," I urged the others. "Anything."

"I didn't even hear the shots," Donna said. "I was outside." She sounded as if she felt cheated. She'd missed it all.

"The rest of us sure heard them," Sally, who played the 1892 neighbor Mrs. Churchill in the reenactments, declared. "All four of them."

Michelle, the Borden's maid Bridget in the reenactments, nodded in agreement. She'd heard all the shots, too.

"What about before? A fight? Argument?"

Donna said, "I think maybe I heard him get up and go to the bathroom before I went outside."

"Before the shots?"

"Yes. Maybe ten, twenty minutes."

Cameron Printing and Publishing, Inc., had their own two-story beige brick building in a commercial section of Morristown a few blocks from the train station. The dark-haired, fiftyish woman I talked to, a little overweight in a dark brown pants suit, appeared still stunned by the death of Stephanie Stewart.

"I can hardly concentrate on business," she told me. "What an awful waste. He seemed such a nice man, her husband. Talked to everyone. So friendly. What could have—"

"Was there any trouble at home you might have heard about? Any hints from the people who worked closely with her?"

"Not a whisper. She loved her house, her garden, their friends. She often said how lucky she and Fred were to have so many friends who lived so close to them they never had to drive far for a party."

"Nothing wrong in the office?"

"Oh, my goodness, no. She was the best. Only last month Mr. Cameron told Stephanie he would almost certainly make her a vice president next year. She has . . . had . . . a real future here."

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"Men?"

She stared at me. "Men? You mean here in the office? *Affairs?*"

"It happens."

"Not with Stephanie!" The woman was outraged. "Why, she kept a copy of her wedding album right in her office to show people. Her marriage meant everything to her. I mean, if anyone was going to do that it would have been him!"

"You have any reason to think he *was* doing that?"

"Well," she hesitated, and scowled. "No, of course not. But . . . well . . . the last year, when he came to picnics and parties here, he seemed a little . . . restless. I mean, he wasn't as much fun. Kind of quiet. Not talking much."

"Unhappy?"

She hesitated again. "More like distracted. Not really there, you know?"

"Like he had something, or someone, else on his mind?"

"No. I mean . . . Oh, I don't know what I'm saying." She took a grip on herself. "There was nothing wrong. I mean, people change a little. That's all it was."

The Morristown police had nothing to add. They confirmed that neither Fred nor Stephanie had ever been in trouble. They had known the Stewarts had a gun, but that wasn't unusual for householders in the small-town and rural area.

None of the neighbors could add anything.

Only an old Rutgers friend of Fred's who lived in Short Hills had something new to tell me. "They were fine whenever I went over. Sure, they talked about kids, but no one seemed in a hurry. The only thing unusual was last year. At a dinner party, Fred asked me if I could get them a good rate for a month in Las Vegas. I go there a lot in my business. He said he wanted to see the place, even if he didn't gamble. I said sure, and about a month later he switched their vacation from a trip to the Southwest to see the Alamo and Grand Canyon to a month in Vegas."

"How'd he like Vegas?"

"He didn't. Or at least Steph didn't. Seems after a few days seeing shows and eating, he decided to try the blackjack tables. He lost a nickel or two, and Steph hated that. So they came back early, and went down to the shore for the last two weeks on the beach."

He laughed.

In the sitting room where Andrew Borden had died, Sally, a.k.a Mrs. Churchill, said, "I heard him leave the room, too. Only I don't think he went to the bathroom. I'm sure I heard him go down the stairs, because I wondered where he could be going so late, and listened for him to come back."

"Did you hear him come back?"

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She shook her head. "I guess I was talking or something."

"I heard him come back," Martha, the owner, said grudgingly. She wanted it all to end, to have her house back. "It was perhaps five minutes. I'm sure I heard the front door open and close twice. I think he went to their car."

"Did you tell the police all this?"

They nodded. They'd told the police.

"We told them we heard him talking to someone, too," Sally added.

"Talking?" The whispering in my head grew louder. "To whom?"

"We don't know," Sally said. "His wife, I guess. It was maybe ten, twenty minutes before he shot her."

The Fall River police weren't glad to see me, but they were polite. Yes, they'd been told about Fred Stewart getting up and leaving the room that night. They decided he'd gone down to his car for the gun.

"That's why we charged first degree," Lieutenant Pessoa said.

Yes, they'd been told about him talking to someone.

"Must have been talking to himself," Pessoa theorized. "He sure wasn't talking to his wife. The slugs in the mattress and the floor prove she was lying in bed. No signs she made any attempt to evade, plead with him, or hide, and she didn't scream. The doc says all the forensics says she was shot in her sleep, and there wasn't anyone else in that room. Not a chance."

"You checked for ladders? The roof?"

"First things we did. No ladders around the place, no marks of a ladder in the dirt, and it was soft after the rain we'd had the day before. No marks on the roof. It's slate, anything anyone hooked on to lower down would have left a mark." Pessoa shook his head, and smiled at me. "Whatever the hell crazy notion you got is dead wrong. He was talking to himself, Fortune. He got the gun and he shot her. End of story."

"No," I said. "There's still why, Pessoa."

"Why ain't my job."

"Yeah," I said.

In the corridor I made a series of phone calls to everyone I'd spoken to earlier, and then put in a call to Saul Jenkins.

Jenkins met me at the jail up in Massachusetts. "You have something I can use, Dan?"

"Oh, I have something. I think I do. But I'm not sure how you can use it."

"That's a big help."

They gave us one of those small visiting rooms for the prisoners to talk to their lawyers in private. When Fred Stewart came in, he neither frowned nor smiled. He sat down. Polite, but uninterested.

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So completely calm, it seemed like he wasn't there at all. A smallish man, dark-haired, his folded hands resting calmly in his lap as he waited for whatever would happen next.

I started. "My name's Dan Fortune. I'm a private detective hired by Mr. Jenkins, there." I nodded to Jenkins.

There was no reaction.

"I've talked to your parents, your friends, the people where you both work. I think I know what happened."

Nothing. Had he retreated so deep into wherever he was, into some remote part of himself, that there was no way I could reach him? No way anyone could?

"A whole month's vacation every year," I said. "That's what finally did it, right?"

Not even a blink.

I took a deep breath. "Those first few years you saved to build your retirement portfolio, build up your stocks and bonds, your insurance. So you took the month at the Jersey shore. Nothing fancy. Red Bank. Ocean City. The fourth year you upped it to Cape May. In a good hotel. Then you both got promotions and raises. The house was all fixed up, you felt pretty secure, so that year it was out to California and Disneyland. Before you were even thirty."

A flicker. So faint I almost missed it. Of what? Not fear, I was sure of that. He wasn't afraid. Anger? Was that it?

I leaned closer to the glass separating us. "The next year it was Mount Rushmore, the Crazy Horse monument, and the Custer battlefield. A driving trip, sort of like this year. Then back to California to Universal City and Magic Mountain."

The change would have been unnoticeable outside, but inside the closetlike room it was palpable. He was suddenly in the room. Watching me. Back from wherever he'd been inside himself since the murder.

Jenkins sensed it, too. "Fred, can you—"

I kicked Saul under the table. Hard. Stewart had started to turn toward Jenkins. I knew if he did, I'd lose him. I had to keep him listening to me. In a kind of trance. My voice the only sound in the room.

"Four years ago you went to Dodger town in Florida. One of those baseball camps where you lived and trained and played like a real professional for a month. You'd played in high school, but you were too small for the college game, so that camp must have been fun. Back in uniform, on a real diamond with the pros, right?"

He was looking back at me, Saul forgotten.

I plunged on, "Steph and your mother went to Disney World while you were in the camp. She liked it so much she had to share it with you, so three years ago you took the drive back to Florida and Disney World. Then, two years ago you asked your gambling

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friend to get you into Vegas, took a fling at the blackjack tables, but Steph hated it so you cut it short, and this year it was another driving trip. New England. The fort at Ticonderoga, a whaling ship in New Bedford, Poe's house, the Salem witches, and *her* house."

His hands, still resting in his lap, moved.

"It was the house, wasn't it? The house and *her.* Being in that house. Where she killed them both. She got off, but we all know she did it. No one knew why. But you know, don't you? The money, they said, but it wasn't the money, was it? It was something else, maybe the stingy, controlling father, the times she lived in, the social restrictions. You know why she did it, and why you did it. For you the trigger was the house—and *her.*"

Our eyes locked, and his body gave a violent twitch where he sat with his oddly empty eyes fixed on my face, but he still made no sound.

"*She* was in that room, wasn't she? You were heard talking. That was *her* you were talking to. Did she tell you to do it? Telling you to break free, get away from your life? Telling you to kill Steph? To free both of you? Talking to you—"

When it finally came, his voice had that same utter calm. A voice from wherever he was now. Soft and gentle. Almost loving. "*She* was sitting on a chair across the room from the bed. A brocade chair. From the period. I hadn't been able to sleep. All I could think of was *her,* and the axe, and how she just walked up to them and hit them. Over and over. Forty whacks for her. Forty-one for him. She did it, but they acquitted her. We talked. She said the jury really understood, but couldn't admit they understood, so they acquitted her and went home." He nodded slowly, agreeing with himself.

It had probably been coming inside him for a long time, maybe all his life, but certainly for the last few years, and he had broken. The *house.* The reenactment of the murders with a snack afterwards. What the house and the murders had become. A bed-and-breakfast for tourists. Meaningless entertainment for empty lives. The final small weight that tipped the scale and sent him over the cliff.

I kept my eyes fixed on his face, my voice low, hypnotic. "Packaging," I said. "Everything in your life was packaged. Education, sports, wedding, house, furniture, friends, activities. As if it all came out of a cereal box. Only the vacations were different, a break in routine, something to look forward to. Until about two years ago. Then you looked closer and suddenly saw the vacations were all packaged, too. Artificial. All a show, a pageant, a charade, and when the game was over they served a buffet."

He almost smiled from that distant place where he was now, a lost person, yet at peace. "Something real. With meaning, consequences." His blank eyes turned to look at me, at Saul Jenkins. "Something had to be real. For both of us." ●

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The House of Usher Revisited

by Stanley Cohen

The absolute brilliance of Edgar Allan Poe's writing goes unquestioned in the minds of today's readers and writers of mystery fiction. His use of language — particularly his repeated embellishments on the imagery he uses to describe things—is no less than dazzling. It's no wonder he has become the patron saint to all of us who labor to supply mystery stories to an audience voraciously demanding more, and more, and more.

But sometimes, when I read Poe, I wish there were a few *less* of these embellishments. Sometimes when I read him, I feel he plies embellishments on top of embellishments, and I get so bogged down in all the embellishments, my mind begins to drift and doze, and I say to myself, why doesn't he get on with it? As I read him, I often think of all the editors who've said to *me* over the years, "Less is more! Less is more!"

On May 2nd, the Mystery Writers of America will hold a banquet, as they do every year, to present a series of awards named for Edgar Allan Poe, the father of the modern mystery story. (Poe wrote the first detective story, published in 1841.) In what follows, writer Stanley Cohen has a bit of fun at Poe's expense, first "distilling" one of Poe's stories, then creating a pastiche of it. We hope readers, especially those attending the Edgar banquet, will find it amusing. ¶

I once lived the life of a chemical engineer in the corporate world before giving it up to devote myself to the task of helping supply mystery fiction to that voracious market. And during those years of corporate life, I was once treated to a corporate course entitled, "How to Write Shorter and Better Reports." Having had this training, I decided to take one of Poe's stories, one of my favorites, and see if I could apply the principles learned in that

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course and, shall I say, "distill" the story? Boil away some of the excess, while still preserving the concentrated essence?

What follows is what remains of "The Fall of the House of Usher" after my distillation process has been carried out on the story. This draft begins with the very first word of Poe's text and ends with the very last word, and every word in between is taken direct from his text, in the *order* in which it appears in that text; even the punctuation is kept essentially intact. Thus, a "distillate," if you will. The result is not just a summary. It is not so brief as, say, a Lamb's Tale of one of the Bard's plays, but instead is the complete story, but reduced in length by an estimated two thirds. I think it still holds the essence of Poe's tale. Give it a read, and then, we'll talk more. . . .

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER
(Distilled from the Poe original by Stanley Cohen)

During the whole of a dark, dull, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a dreary tract of country; and found myself, as evening drew on, within view of the House of Usher. With the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I looked upon the scene—the bleak walls, the vacant eye-like windows, a few rank sedges, and trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression. What was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?

I reined my horse to the brink of a black tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down with a shudder upon the inverted images of the gray sedge, the ghastly tree-stems, and the eye-like windows. In this mansion of gloom, I proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been my boon companion in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had reached me from him which admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. spoke of acute bodily illness, a mental disorder which oppressed him, and an earnest desire to see me.

Although we had been intimate associates, I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive. I was aware, however, that his family had been noted for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself in many works of exalted art and in deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity. I had learned, too, that the Usher race had put forth no enduring branch; in other words, the entire family lay in the direct line of descent. It was this deficiency of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the

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name, which had so identified the two as to merge, in the appellation "House of Usher," both the family and the family mansion.

When I uplifted my eyes to the house itself from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which reeked from the decayed trees, the wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, and leaden hued.

Shaking off what *must* have been a dream, I scanned the building. Its principal feature seemed to be an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior. Yet all this was apart from any dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen. However, a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure from the roof in front, down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me in silence through many dark passages to the *studio* of his master. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on.

The room was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and a distance from the floor. Feeble gleams of light through the trellised panes struggled to reach the remoter angles of the chamber. The furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about. An atmosphere of sorrow, an air of gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Usher rose from a sofa and greeted me with a vivacious warmth. We sat down and for some moments while we spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. A cadaverousness of complexion, an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison, lips thin and pallid, a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, a finely molded chin, a countenance not easily forgotten.

In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence—an inconsistency; and I found this to arise from feeble struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy, an excessive nervous agitation. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied from a tremulous indecision to that species of energetic concision observed in the lost drunkard or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during periods of most intense excitement.

He spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered into what he conceived to be his malady, a constitutional and a

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family evil, for which he despaired to find a remedy. He suffered from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could only wear garments of a certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

"I shall perish," said he, "I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul." I learned, moreover, another feature of his condition. He was enchained by superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling he tenanted—from which he never ventured forth—conveyed in terms of an effect which the *physique* of gray walls had brought about upon the *morale* of his existence. He admitted, however, that much of the peculiar gloom which afflicted him could be traced to a far more palpable origin—the severe and long-continued illness of a beloved sister, his sole companion of long years, his last and only relative on earth. Her decease, he said, would leave him the last of the ancient race of Ushers.

While he spoke, the Lady Madeline (for so she was called) passed through a remote portion of the apartment, and without having noticed my presence, disappeared. A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps. When a door closed upon her, my glance sought the countenance of the brother; but he had buried his face in his hands, through which trickled many passionate tears.

The disease of Lady Madeline had long baffled her physicians. A gradual wasting away, and frequent affections of a partially cataleptic character were the usual diagnosis. Hitherto, she had borne up against her malady, but on the evening of my arrival, she succumbed to the power of the destroyer, and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained would be the last I would obtain, that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

For several days I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together, or listened to the wild improvisations of his guitar. It was perhaps the narrow limits to which he confined himself upon the guitar which gave birth to the fantastic character of his performances. But the fervid *facility* of his impromptus could not be accounted for; they must have been, and were, in the notes as well as in the words of his wild fantasias (for he not infrequently accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations), the result of that intense mental concentration observable only in moments of artificial excitement. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have remembered. The verses were entitled, "The Haunted Palace."

Suggestions arising from this ballad led us into a train of

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thought wherein became manifest an opinion of Usher's, the opinion of the sentience of all vegetable things. I lack words to express the full extent or the earnest *abandon* of his persuasion. The belief, however, was connected with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers, in the order of their arrangement, as well as in the many *fungi* which overspread them, and of the decayed trees, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn.

Books formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid. We pored over one volume exceedingly rare and curious—the manual of a forgotten church. I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the Lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previously to its final interment) in one of the numerous vaults within the building. The reason was one I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial ground of the family.

At the request of Usher, I aided him in the arrangements. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it was small, damp, and entirely without light, lying immediately beneath my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place for deposit of powder, or some other highly combustible substance, as its floor, and the interior of an archway through which we reached it, were sheathed in copper. The door, of massive iron, caused an unusually sharp, grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

Having deposited our mournful burden, we turned aside the lid of the coffin and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between brother and sister now arrested my attention, and Usher, divining my thoughts, murmured that the deceased and himself had been twins. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead, and that suspiciously lingering smile so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid and secured the door of iron.

And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over my friend. His ordinary occupations were neglected. The pallor of his countenance assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. It was no wonder that his condition infected me. I felt creeping upon me the wild influences of his own fantastic superstitions.

It was upon retiring to bed the night of the eighth day after the

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placing of the Lady Madeline within the donjon, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep came not near my couch. I endeavored to believe that what I felt was due to the influence of the gloomy furniture of the room. Overpowered by my intense horror, I threw on my clothes and endeavored to arouse myself from the pitiable condition into which I had fallen by pacing rapidly to and fro.

I had taken but few turns in this manner when Usher rapped and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan—but there was a mad hilarity in his eyes—a restrained *hysteria* in his demeanor. His air appalled me—but anything was preferable to the solitude I had so long endured, and I welcomed his presence as a relief.

"And you have not seen it?" he said. "You have not then seen it? Stay! You shall!" He hurried to one of the casements and threw it open to the storm. The fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was a tempestuous yet beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity. We had no glimpse of the moon or stars, nor was there any lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which enshrouded the mansion.

"You must not behold this!" said I, as I led him with a gentle violence from the window to a seat. "These are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon—or may have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement. The air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read and you shall listen—and so we will pass away this terrible night together."

The antique volume which I had taken up was the "Mad Trist" of Sir Lancelot Canning—but I had called it a favorite of Usher's more in sad jest than in earnest; for, in truth, there is little in it which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend. It was, however, the only book immediately at hand.

I arrived at that portion of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the Trist, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good an entrance by force. The words of the narrative run thus: "Ethelred uplifted his mace, and, with blows, made room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise reverberated throughout the forest."

At the termination of this sentence I paused; for it appeared that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came

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what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Lancelot had described. It was, beyond doubt, the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention; for, amid the rattling of sashes and the commingled noises of the still increasing storm, the sound had nothing which should have disturbed me. I continued the story: ". . . But the good champion Ethelred, now entering the door, was enraged to perceive no hermit, but in the stead thereof, a dragon. And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath with a shriek so piercing that Ethelred had fain to close his ears. . . ." I paused, and now with a feeling of wild amazement, I did actually hear a low and distant, but harsh, protracted, and screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of the dragon's shriek.

Oppressed as I was upon the occurrence of this second most extraordinary coincidence, I still retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting my companion. I was by no means certain that he had noticed the sounds; although, a strange alteration had taken place in his demeanor. His lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly. His head dropped upon his breast. He rocked from side to side. Having taken notice of all this, I resumed the narrative: ". . . And now the champion, having escaped the fury of the dragon, removed the carcass from out of the way and approached over the silver pavement to the shield upon the wall; which fell at his feet upon the silver floor with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound."

No sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than I became aware of a distinct hollow, metallic, and clangorous reverberation. Completely unnerved, I started convulsively to my feet; but the rocking of Usher was undisturbed. I rushed to the chair in which he sat. As I laid my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his frame; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; he spoke in a low, gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. Bending over his person, I drank in the hideous import of his words.

"Now hear it?—Yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. Many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!—I *dared* not speak! *We have put her living in her tomb!* I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. Many, many days ago. And now—to-night—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the archway of the vault! Oh, whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her

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footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish the heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!—*I tell you that she now stands without the door!"*

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the Lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon her brother, and in her now final death agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure of which I have spoken, as extending from the roof of the building to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once on my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *"House of Usher"*.

And there you have it. One of his greatest masterpieces, but told in, shall I say, a slightly abbreviated form. Not a summary. Not a "Lamb's Tale." The complete story, in Poe's own words but a lot fewer of them.

But sly, devilish, and irreverent fellow that I am, I find that I'm somehow inclined to want to retell this story as *I* might have written it. And as if it had happened in *today's* world; I'm just not into costume tales. And I've also done it with the hope of an occasional *smile* from anyone who reads it. Give it a try. . . .

A FALL AT THE HOUSE OF USHER

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I cruised in my rented MG along narrow roads, one after another, across the English countryside, following the directions Roddy had sent me, since I'd never been there before, and I finally came to

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the Usher mansion.

My first reaction: The place was immense. Immense! And it looked quite substantial, this huge stone edifice . . . except that there was this one sort of crack in the masonry, near the entrance, and extending down from just under the roofline, into the foundation. My next reaction: a big place, yes, but the entire structure was covered with . . . algae? Yecch! The windows, which obviously had once been fancy cut-glass things, looked like they hadn't been cleaned in a century or two. The sparse plantings around the place consisted of a few rank sedges, all of them near dead. And the place was completely surrounded by a body of water which Roddy had always referred to as a "tarn."

I parked the MG I'd rented at Heathrow, got out, and looked down into the tarn. Yecch, again! Dank! This was one dank tarn! "Rank Sedges and a Dank Tarn" . . . Good title for a song, maybe. Nice beat.

Carrying my suitcase, I walked across the centuries-old bridge to the entrance and yanked a rope hanging out of a hole in the door, ringing a bell inside. An ageing servant with a gaunt face, wearing tattered, ill-fitting black clothes, slowly opened the creaking door. I stepped inside and looked around the place.

Having seen the outside, what did I expect to find inside? It was a castle, no less! A real, honest-to-goodness, genuine castle! An antiquity! . . . And it looked like it hadn't been given a good cleaning since feudal days. . . . Jeez, what a dump!

But I was possibly committed to being there for a stay of some length. That call I'd received from Roddy . . . I couldn't see how I could refuse him. We'd been close—more than just close—buddies at Oxford when I went there on my Fulbright. We'd been *boon* companions, no less, and based on that call . . . "Yes, man, I'll come, I promise," I'd said. "I'll take the time if you feel that strongly. Don't give it a thought." I hadn't seen him in many years—in fact, not since college, some thirty years. And I was a little intrigued. And, he'd sounded so pathetic, describing his strange list of ailments and symptoms, and insisting, absolutely pleading, that my presence, and my presence alone, would make all the difference. "I'm not a physician, Roddy," I'd insisted. "And definitely no psychiatrist. I'm only a plastic surgeon. I just fix things on people so they'll look a little better. You know, noses, breasts, a tuck here, a tuck there, that sort of thing."

"Please," he'd begged. And here I was. My list of lady clients in New York would just have to wait a couple of weeks longer for their repairs.

The servant led me through corridors and chambers and halls and landings, and up and down stone stairways, where, at every turn, I half-expected Errol Flynn to come bounding out, in the middle of a sword fight with the Sheriff of Nottingham. Finally, we

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entered a large, darkened room full of heavy, threadbare ancient furniture and tapestries, with books and musical instruments strewn about, and then, when I saw him, I gasped. "Roddy?"

Was this cadaverous specter before me my old Oxford chum? He looked like an illustration out of a book of Poe! His face was shaggy with hair, part beard and part stuff falling down from the sides of his nearly bald head, his nose a hawk's beak, his eyes sunken but brightly luminous and liquid, his neck but a collection of cords loosely wrapped in wrinkled skin, his lips almost nonexistent around a mouth agape. His dark clothes (robes, really) hung from his body. As soon as he saw me, tears began flowing down his drawn face. "You came," he sobbed.

"Of course," I said. "I told you I would." Then, without thinking, I asked, "So, how are you, old buddy?"

For a moment he couldn't speak. Finally, out it all came. He tearfully elaborated on his many afflictions: He could eat only the blandest crap; all, even mild, odors made him nauseous; he hid from sunlight, in fact, most any bright light; he never went outside and hadn't for many years; no clothing could touch his skin except silk, which he explained came from the spinnerets of lovely little silkworms; and he could endure no noises except music from certain stringed instruments. (This was, I gathered, without attached amplifiers.)

His body was in constant motion as he tried to sit there, all tics and jerks and itches and scratches and sudden lunges and quick snapbacks. And he complained that he could get no sleep for all the "phantasmagoric images" that rollicked and paraded endlessly through his feverish brain, night and day. In other words, my old buddy was a mess.

"Now that you're here, I'm sure you can help me," he said, gasping between words.

"I think I could do a little something with that wattle of yours," I offered, "and maybe that neck. I'm good on necks. If I could get you into an acceptable operating facility. Is there a decent hospital in the neighborhood?"

"Hospital!" He was suddenly wide-eyed with terror, as if standing paralyzed in an open field somewhere in Africa, mesmerized by the sight of a charging lion. "Oh, God, no! No hospitals! . . . It is on my *psyche* that I need your surgery. And I'm sure that you can do it! You are my best friend in the world! And you always had that effect on me."

This was getting sticky. "Roddy? What can I do?"

"Your very presence here, your lifelong friendship and kindness, will help me rid my teeming brain of the multifarious demons . . . that are alive in this castle! And that rip . . . and chew . . . at the very roots of my soul!"

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"Then why not leave the place?"

He reacted as if I'd asked him to stick his head in the proverbial oven. "Leave? Leave the home of every Usher since the beginning of the Usher clan?"

And he expected *me* to help him? How long was this going to take? A little tuck here, a little tuck there. . . .

Then he abruptly calmed down, but with a decidedly dank (tarn-dank) look in his luminous eye. "Actually," he said, quite slowly, "it is the grave, grave condition of my sister, the Lady Madeline, that has so upset me that I am as you see me."

I remembered Madeline. A knockout. "Madeline? I remember her. In fact, I remember that you had two twin sisters, Adeline and Madeline. You three were triplets. Right?"

"Yes."

"Ah, yes, I remember them well. The three of you together used to do those haunting baroque, classical musical routines at parties. 'Addie, Maddie, and Rod,' you called yourselves, with you on lute. Right?"

He honked through his nose into a filthy handkerchief. Then he looked gravely at me. "That was then, and this is now."

"And you say Madeline is seriously ill. Where is she now?"

"The Lady Madeline is here, constantly surrounded by all her physicians, but her condition is nonetheless grave, very grave."

"She's here? Right here in this . . . building?"

"Here."

"And what does *she* have?"

"She is simply wasting away, and her physicians are at a loss to diagnose her malady."

"Why don't you get her to a hospital?"

His eyes flew open with that look of horror, once again, as he threw his hands into the air. "A hospital? My God, man!" Then, "And with her decease, if it should happen, and I fear it will, and soon, I . . . will be the last of the Ushers."

"What about Adeline?"

"She is no longer an Usher," he breathed, saying it as a pronouncement, as if she'd committed some mortal sin. "She left, ran away to America, and married a dentist. They live in Terre Haute, Indiana."

"They have any little Usherettes yet?" Then, "Forget I said that, Roddy. Back to Madeline."

And at that moment, in the poorly lit far end of the very large room where we sat, a door opened, and a tall woman, looking almost like a specter, and trailing yards and yards of gauzy fabric, passed through that end of the room, and out another door.

The Lady Madeline? I looked at Roddy. His hands covered his face as he wept, and tears trickled between his bony fingers, dropping onto his robes.

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"Was that Madeline?" I asked.

He took his hands away from his wet face. "That is probably the last time you'll see her alive."

I never saw his sister again and we never discussed her. The next day we fell into a sort of routine. A routine that seemed to comfort him. He sat at my feet with his chin on my knee and I stroked his head as I read to him from moldy old volumes of stories of knights of old, or he played on the many stringed instruments lying about the room, a kind of music I'd seldom if ever heard before, and that's an understatement. But these two activities seemed to soothe him, and that was good enough for me. But I wondered how long this was going to take, as day after day went rolling by. My lady clients in New York were waiting for their tucks here and tucks there.

On one of the occasions when he was playing music on some obscure stringed instrument and staring at me with his liquid eyes, he began reciting verse, a long but cleverly rhymed poem, and as I listened to the words, I suddenly picked up a message: It was about the castle, yes, and about some horrendous fate that would someday befall it. . . .

At least mealtimes weren't at all terrible. No problem there. At each and every meal he ate a shallow dish of something plain, white, and indistinguishable, and nothing else, and while he ate his "white," his cook served me spectacular food: luscious eggs with meat and scones and wondrous coffee at breakfast, and truly rare viands at dinner, hearty stews and robust roasted mutton and fowl, and fresh, crisp, perfectly seasoned greens, and memorable cakes and puddings.

But while the food was good, other living conditions were less acceptable. I felt all crawly each time I arose from the ancient bed in my chamber in the morning and poured the pitcher of cold water over my head in lieu of a shower. As for sanitary conditions, don't even ask. Medieval! But the days went by, one after another.

And finally, one night, he informed me that the Lady Madeline was no more.

"So sorry, Roddy. Have you made some arrangements for her?" I asked.

"I do not wish to inter her just yet," he said, "due to the prominent location of the family burial ground, questions which might arise about the unusual character of her malady, and any inquiries which might come from medical men or various officials."

"What *do* you wish to do, then?" I asked.

"She is already encoffined. I would like you to help me carry it to a chamber in the lower depths of the building as a temporary resting place, for now."

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"You're *sure* this is what you wish to do? I mean, won't there be some tough questions to answer, old friend?"

"I am sure."

I reluctantly agreed. Such an idea wouldn't go down too well in Manhattan, but here? And maybe this would lead to a turning point in his recovery, and I'd be able to get out of there.

And so, at around midnight one night, after the servants had left, we began lugging it, bumping along in places, occasionally dropping it, occasionally letting it slide down the stone steps, making our way through rooms and corridors and heavy doors. I was amazed at the strength he displayed, considering his frail body; that strength had to be coming from some frantic madness that possessed him. We finally arrived at a chamber somewhere deep in the bowels of the castle, where the air was damp and cold as a witch's heart. (You'll notice I said "heart.")

We struggled to open the heavily rusted steel door and carried the casket inside. Barely illuminated by the lantern we'd carried atop the casket, the room, I could see, was a dungeon, and it had a . . . was this a copper floor? He insisted on lifting the heavy casket cover with its rusty hinges that squealed like a stuck pig, and when the lantern threw light on her face, I saw the striking resemblance to him. And there was a trace of a blush of color, and even a slight smile on her face! I quickly closed the top.

"When do you plan to bury her?" I asked.

"Maybe Sunday," he replied with a slight smile of his own.

"Sunday funerals are always nice. She'll be fine here until then." . . . Sunday was six days away.

I hurried him along as we returned to the upper floors.

I repaired to my own chamber, and let's call it a restless night. The next morning, despite his grieving presence, we resumed our routine. After a hearty breakfast, I read to him with his chin on my knee, or he played his twangy chords and sang lines of vague depressing verse. And once in a while we did watercolors. But he wasn't getting better. As each day crept by, he was becoming darker and darker in mood, always ruminating about one ghastly thing or another, and it was affecting me. I wasn't helping *him;* he was making *me* sick. How much longer was I going to hang around the place?

On Friday night one hell of a storm hit the area. The winds sounded like they were blowing with hurricane force, and torrents of rain buffeted the windows. Unable to sleep because of the racket from the storm, I got up and dressed and began pacing in my room.

Suddenly the door to the room opened and you can guess who entered. In a state of total hysteria. "Have you seen it?" he shouted. "Have you seen what's going on outside?" He opened one of the windows and the storm came blowing in, bringing with it a small

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flood, yes, but there definitely *was* a strange, glowing luminescence all about, something like I'd *never* seen, as the almost continuous lightning lit up the heavy fog that enshrouded the castle.

I forced the window shut. "Relax, Roddy," I said. "It's just a storm. Okay, buddy? Here. Sit right here and I'll read to you to calm you down. Okay?"

To my relief, he accepted my assurance and dropped to the floor, putting his chin on my knee, as usual, but he was trembling. I stroked his head a time or two, and it was damp with the sweat of mortal fear. I picked up the first book I touched among the one or two antique volumes lying on a shelf near at hand. "Here's one of your favorites," I said. It turned out to be the *Mad Trist* of Sir Lancelot Canning, definitely not a great choice for the moment, but I didn't want to start fumbling around from book to book, so I opened it and, with the winds howling and the storm thundering away outside, I started reading.

I had arrived at the passage in the story where Ethelred, the hero of the Trist, decides to force his way into the hermit's house by knocking a hole in the door with his mace. And as soon as I had read it, a noise exactly fitting the description of the action in the book reverberated from somewhere below in the castle. I paused and looked around. What the hell was that? The servants were gone. There was no one else in the place.

I started reading again and came to the passage where Ethelred again lifted his mace to smite the charging dragon ("with the pesty breath") on the head, and then I paused, because there was no question about it: A harsh screaming or grating sound which exactly matched the description in the book echoed from somewhere below. How could it be? Two such striking coincidences in quick succession. I looked down at Roddy, who was suddenly babbling in what appeared to be stark terror. Again I commenced reading, arriving at the passage where Ethelred approaches a massive shield on the wall and it falls to the floor with a deafening clang. And once again, a matching clang came from somewhere below. . . .

I looked at Roddy, who by this point was clinging to my knee with both hands, hugging it, his face pressed against it. His babble had become a screaming fit. "You hear that?" he shouted. "I hear it!" he continued. "And I've *been* hearing it! I've been hearing it for *nights! We have put the Lady Madeline, living, in her tomb!"*

And as he said it, I had to admit that I'd been hearing some rather strange noises the last few nights myself.

And then he shouted, *"Madman! I tell you that she now stands right outside that door!"*

Me, madman? Why was he calling me madman? Everything we'd done had been *his* idea.

But as soon as he said it, the door to my chamber swung open,

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and there she stood! In she stalked, looking tall and emaciated, a frightful expression on her face, her arms extended, walking about like Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein,* blood all over her attractive, designer burial outfit. Wow! What a sight!

She strode forward, directly toward Roddy, whereupon she dropped herself bodily upon him and breathed her last breath. I felt for a pulse at her throat, just to be sure, and yep, she was gone. And from the weight of the collapse of her body on Roddy's, he exhaled a long, noisy wheeze, and that was *his* last breath. I checked for his pulse, too, to be sure. And, yep, he was gone, too. And since all the servants had left earlier, I wasn't sure that was the place I wanted to hang around alone, so I decided I'd best hit the bricks. Fast!

I ran out of the room, and after making several wrong turns, finally found my way back to the entrance to the castle. I cleared the door and hurried across the bridge to the road where my rented MG waited for me.

I turned and looked back at the House of Usher, and, remember that crack in the masonry I mentioned at the beginning of this tale? Well, it was getting wider . . . and wider . . . and wider. And remember that strange luminescence I described when Roddy first came to my chamber earlier and we looked out the window? Well, some of that light was coming right through that crack, which was spreading faster and faster as I stood watching, until, whoa, baby, the whole big castle began to split right in half, and crumble, and slowly sink and disappear into that nasty tarn, bringing an end forever to the House of Usher, both the edifice and the last of those who'd populated it. *En Pace Requiescat.*

I climbed into my MG and fired it up and drove through the night like a crazy person, fighting the blinding rain that came in huge, unrelenting sheets pounding at my windshield, hoping as I drove that I'd make the right twists and turns that would get me to Heathrow where I could catch a flight back to New York, back to my own life, and all of my ladies in waiting. Waiting for . . . a tuck here, a tuck there. . . . ●

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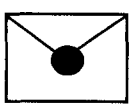

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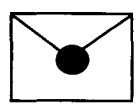

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Art by Allen Davis

A Taste for Burning

by Marilyn Todd

The wood wasn't dry enough to burn properly. That meant it would be slow, poor little cow. Martin Pepper took a long swig at his flagon and belched. Look at her. Tied so tight to the stake that the bonds left wheals in her already lacerated young flesh. Only a few straggly strands on her scalp hinted at the lustrous raven-black hair which had, until recently, swung with heavy sensuality over her shoulders. The bulk of it had been shorn like a sheep.

She had been lively, then, this Alizon Norton. Kicking, spitting, biting, screeching, with energy enough for six as they dragged her away. She had alternately cursed her accusers and protested her innocence to God in a voice loud enough to wake the dead in the graveyard. After two days of dipping, of course, her voice had turned to a rasp. After a week of sleep deprivation, she was barely able to mumble her protests and curses. Although it was only after the floggings that they dried up completely.

Martin upended the flagon, the wine dribbling down his unshaven chin. Where was her precious God now? He wiped his

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mouth with the back of his hand. Tell me. Where was her God when she needed him most?

"Burn the witch! Burn the Devil's whore!"

Faces contorted with hatred taunted the whimpering figure. Faces belonging to decent, ordinary folk. Blacksmith Wilkes. Parson Hardwicke. All the good men and women of Sulborough Green who were gathered here today. Carpenters, apprentices, dairymaids, reapers—everyone had turned out for the spectacle, and men, women, and children chanted in unison.

"Stop!" Martin Pepper staggered into the crowd. "For pity's sake, allow the woman to die with some dignity!"

"It wasn't your cattle she bewitched," shouted someone from the back.

"Nor your child she cursed to be stillborn," spat Bessie Nokes.

"I had no pains in my hip until that bitch came along," someone else piped up.

"And Tom Shaw would not have fallen into his vat of boiling dye," boomed the deep, decisive voice of the blacksmith. One barrel arm was wrapped protectively around a sobbing middle-aged woman. "Jennet here would still be a wife and not be a grieving and penniless widow."

"That's right," snarled the wheelwright. "So piss off, you drunken old sod."

Roughly he pushed Martin away and instantly the rest of the crowd followed his lead, spinning the old man from one to another, their jeers of derision ringing dizzy in his ears. With a final push, Pepper was sent sprawling into the middens. He heard his flagon crack. Saw the last few dregs of his wine soak into the slime beneath him.

"Burn the witch! Burn the witch!"

The stomping of feet and the clapping of hands now accompanied the chant as the mood of the crowd reached fever pitch. Martin did not understand. A few weeks ago they'd never clapped eyes on Alizon Norton. Now they were howling for blood.

"Burn the witch! Burn the witch!"

Crawling under an elder tree, the old man covered his ears with

One of the trademarks of Marilyn Todd's historical fiction is the timelessness of her heroines; one feels they could enter quite easily into society today. Like her Ancient Roman heroine Claudia Seferius, the crime solver in several novels and two *EQMM* stories, her new story's sleuth, Eleanor Dearborn, demonstrates resourcefulness and verve as she unravels a plot in King James the First's England. ✝

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his hands and was almost glad when the order finally came.

"Light the fire, Constable."

Martin Pepper noticed the constable's hesitation, his obvious distaste at the task. But the voice of Sir Jeremy Farrell did not brook disobedience. Shuffling backwards under the overhang of the branches, Martin watched as a burning brand was stuffed into the pile of branches and twigs around Alizon Norton. He was right. The wood was too green to burn properly. Thick black oily smoke began to swirl upwards, with no breeze to carry it away. The old man blew his nose with his fingers as twigs began to take hold and crackle. He hoped the poor bitch would take with her into the next world not the hatred and bigotry of Sulborough Green, but the beauty and serenity of these rolling Sussex downlands. That her last living moments would capture once again the exquisite song of the warbler in the apple tree, the dance of the river, the scent of the honeysuckle which scrambled over the hedgerows.

As the flames finally began to lick at Alizon Norton's blood-stained shift, Martin Pepper clasped his hands together and prayed for her soul to a God who had deserted them both.

Two weeks later, when calm had descended once more upon the inhabitants of Sulborough Green, when men scythed through fields of barley, oats, and rye stripped to the waist in the searing heat of the afternoon sun, and when women and children followed behind with their gleaning baskets, and when the air rang with the sound of Blacksmith Wilkes's hammer, Miller Nokes's grinding wheel, and the tap-tap-tap of the carpenter's nails, a flurry of hooves thundered down the main street.

Most of the dwellings, Eleanor noticed, were flimsy constructions of clay and twigs with no chimney and no windows, only a single door serving for both entrance of light and exit of smoke. A crew of thatchers was reroofing one of the better cottages, and a man wheeling beans had set his barrow down to chat to a woman with a babe at her hip. Piglets squealed in a sty.

Outside the Thistle & Crown, Eleanor pulled her foaming horse up sharp. There were two inns in the village, on opposite sides of the green, but this was by far the larger and more prosperous of the two. The man she was seeking would be in here, not in the Magpie. Behind her, the other three horsemen of her party reined in. Signalling for them to remain seated, she jumped down and left her exhausted horse in the care of a tall, broad-shouldered ostler who smelled of juniper and fresh hay.

"Lovely day, mistress," the tavern keeper called out.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

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He knew damn well who. Eleanor glanced up the stairs, heard male laughter emanating from a room at the end of the gallery. As she placed her foot on the first wooden step, the tavern keeper laid a warning hand on her arm. The look she shot him would have melted cobblestones, and he withdrew his hand as though stung.

"Which of you bastards is Farrell?"

Six men sat around the table.

"It's you, isn't it?" She marched across the panelled chamber, stopping in front of a man in his early forties with steel-grey hair and eyes to match.

He leaned back in his seat, taking in the wild tumble of auburn curls, the dark flashing eyes, the dusty, if expensive, brocades. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"Nor will you."

The others laughed. Farrell did not. Neither did Eleanor Dearborn.

He rose at last, and bowed. "Allow me to present the other members of the Sulborough Parish Council—"

She glanced at the heavy oak table. Gaming in taverns was illegal, unless, of course, one happens to be the Justice of the Peace responsible for granting the landlord his licence. Underneath the open window, her exhausted horse snorted softly.

Eleanor swept the cards off the table with one furious stroke. "Your puppet councillors don't interest me," she hissed. Coins bounced, spun, rolled into corners, ale from their pewter mugs pooled. "I'm after the man who pulls their strings."

Chairs scraped back in indignation, voices brayed in protest. Farrell silenced the men with his hand. "Your clothes and your jewels are refined," he said coldly, "which is more than can be said for your manners. So let's both of us cut to the chase, shall we? Who are you, and what do you want?"

"What I want, you miserable bastard, is justice."

"I'm a JP." He shrugged. "Reproach goes with the territory. If you have a complaint, I suggest you see my clerk."

"If I have a complaint, I'll see a physician," Eleanor snapped. "What I want from you is an explanation. Namely, why you took it upon yourself to char-grill my sister."

That was on the Monday. By Thursday, Eleanor was no nearer to finding an answer. At least, not a truthful one.

Nor were the lies entirely confined to one side. For a start, since it would not advance her cause any, Eleanor had not given her real name. Sir Geoffrey Dearborn's distinguished reputation would be well known even in this putrid little downland backwater—as, indeed, would the knowledge that he'd taken a bride thirty years his junior for the specific aim of siring an heir. After

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seven years in which the cradle rocked only with the weight of the dust, a certain amount of rumour and innuendo would also have filtered through to Sulborough Green. Eleanor's chance of dredging the truth was slim enough as it was. She could not allow it to be scuppered completely.

Sitting in the lee of the church, beside the very pond that had stretched Alizon's lungs to bursting point, she surveyed the village. Being neither on the main route between London and the south coast nor on the road which cut across the saddleback of the Downs, Sulborough Green did not prosper from passing traffic. Indeed, the high street was in such a sad state of repair that the deep ruts in July would turn into rivulets of mud with the first autumn rains.

The parish was too poor to hire itinerant workers. Witness the raggle-taggle, chimneyless huts, whose doors today were flung wide to admit as much light and fresh air as they could, but in winter would be a hotbed of stench and disease. Witness the coarse homespun clothing, the darning, the patching, the rags hanging off the backs of the children. By law, the highway surveyors were only permitted to call out the parishioners six days a year for maintenance work, and when they did, local hearts were not in the job. At a time when prices were rising faster than wages and rents were soaring, clogged drainage ditches and overhanging hedgerows came second to putting food on the table.

The graveyard of St. Jude's was filling up with men and women literally dropping dead from exhaustion.

Even the church itself had not escaped the run of disaster. When Parson Hardwicke returned from a visit to his bishop in Chichester back in May, it was to find vagrants had stripped St. Jude's of every valuable artefact.

Under such vexing circumstances, Eleanor could see why the villagers sought a scapegoat. Times were hard, nothing was sacred, and when a stranger moved in, she would have been viewed with natural suspicion. The viper settling in their midst. A focus on which to direct their anger, their helplessness, their frustration when things went wrong. In short, they had someone to blame for their troubles.

But *burning* . . . ?

Eleanor stood up, shook her skirts, and stared into the dark depths of the pond where Alizon Norton, bound left hand to right foot and vice versa, would have sucked in as much breath as she could hold for her repeated ordeals beneath its weed-infested waters. Goosepimples rose on Eleanor's skin. There would have been other tortures, too, to extract the false confession that finally sealed Alizon's guilt. And flogging was one of the better ones.

However, small, albeit isolated signs of prosperity peppered the

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village, suggesting that at last the land was starting to reward men for their labours. One of the larger houses that she passed was having glass fitted to its windows. Another cottage was in the process of being thatched, and surely that was a physician dismounting with his bag outside the carpenter's? A black foal pranced in the paddock, chickens pattered and pecked, and fat bees buzzed lazily round the fragrant wayside roses.

Late afternoon, and Sulborough Green was almost deserted in the throbbing midsummer heat. Eleanor glanced down the lane to the mill, where Bessie Nokes had given birth to a stillborn son, and she shuddered. Was the miller's wife so wild with grief that she did not care whether the confession was genuine? That Alizon would have had her hands tied behind her back and been left hanging like that for two, maybe three hours? Perhaps (God forbid) suspended from one of the beams of Bessie's own millhouse?

The stables adjacent to the Thistle & Crown were empty, as Eleanor had timed them to be. The horses were still out to pasture, the groom making the most of the respite with an afternoon romp with the stonemason's pretty, plump wife. Inside, dust motes drifted down in the slanting rays of the sun, and from time to time a rat rustled under the straw. Up in the eaves, swallows darted back and forth to feed their ravenous broods, and the air was acid with the stench of the dung heap outside.

"Who are you?" she asked, adjusting her eyes to the gloom.

From the second stall along came a lazy movement and a tall, muscular young man eased himself slowly to his feet. "Me, miss?" His hair was dark, with a glistening shine. "Will Pike."

"So you claim," she replied, "but who are you really?"

"Will Pike," he insisted, spreading his hands. "Ostler."

"You're good with horses, Will Pike, but you're no more an ostler than I am. Your voice is too refined, your hands are too soft, your back is too straight; you have a manner more suited to silk stockings, leather shoes, lace cravats, and silver studs. You are as much a stranger here as my men and myself, and what's more—" Eleanor pointed to his telltale blisters "—you're a stranger to manual labour."

"If this is how modern woman is turning out—" he clasped his hands over his heart in a wildly theatrical gesture "—what hope is there for modern man, when his every secret is probed and exposed?"

Eleanor settled herself down on a bale of hay, drew her knees up to her chin, and waited.

"If you insist, my lady," he laughed, resting his shoulder against a timber upright, "then I will gladly tell you the story of a young nobleman who left home to become a travelling troubadour, a poet, musician, teller of tales. And who, to his chagrin, discovered that

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the price for such an indulgence all too often involves the digging of turnips, the picking of cherries, and the minding of horses to keep the wolf from his lute."

There was a count of perhaps thirty. "You were listening," she said. "When I confronted Jeremy Farrell on Monday, you were underneath the window. *Listening.*"

"I think you're mistaken."

"I may have my faults, Will Pike, but being wrong isn't one of them. You took my horse when I arrived, so you were aware the poor creature was only one step away from being turned into glue, it was that exhausted from the day's ride. Upstairs, I heard my horse snort beneath the window. Someone calmed him, stroked him, silenced him with kindness, and the only thing the groom strokes at that time of day is the thigh of the stonemason's wife."

When he smiled, he revealed a row of even white teeth. "Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. I meant, you were mistaken in that I might have been listening. My sole concern was for your horse."

"In which case, Will Pike, you would have led him to water. Any more dehydrated and the poor beast was jerky, yet the trough is as far from that upstairs chamber window as a Jew from Christianity." She paused, then said slowly, "I need your help, Will."

"Mine?"

"The villagers talk to you. Me they avoid like a leper, and any who I do manage to ambush turn mute."

"Conscience," the ostler said. "They're ashamed of what happened, they want to forget it—"

"*Forget* it?" Eleanor couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Alizon Norton was burned alive on their own village green, after being tortured to confess to a crime she didn't commit! Her screams would have carried for a quarter of a mile, how can they possibly forget something like that?"

"They can't. That's why there's a hayrick standing where the fire burned the grass, instead of being stacked in the field. Their shame won't permit them to talk about it, not even to one another. They're trying to, but they can't forget. Eleanor, these folk can't look their own parson in the eye, much less their victim's sister."

When the man calling himself Will Pike placed his hands on her shoulders, Eleanor inhaled his heady juniper scent.

"What happened in Sulborough Green is by no means unusual," he said softly. "When mass hysteria takes hold, it invariably ends in a tragedy, and I know you find it hard to believe, Eleanor, but these people *are* deeply sorry and they *are* ashamed of what happened."

She shook his hands off her shoulders and turned away.

"Nothing can bring Alizon back," he said, "but the quicker everyone gets on with their lives, the better. Eleanor, I'm not advising

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forgiveness, but we all have to live with the consequences of our actions. Simply living in the village, constantly reminded of this terrible deed, will be punishment to last them a lifetime. But you. You mustn't allow yourself to become bitter in the process."

"Oh no?" she said thickly. *"Convicta et combusta,* Will Pike. That's how it stands in the official record. *Convicta et combusta,* and that bastard Jeremy Farrell is responsible."

"He signed the papers, yes. But before that could happen there was a proper trial by jury—"

"Which he rigged." Eleanor turned round and looked deep into the ostler's chestnut eyes. "You still don't get it, do you, Will Pike?"

"Get what?" he asked, frowning.

"Jeremy Farrell murdered my sister."

"I'm sorry, Eleanor, but the notion is utterly preposterous."

Night had fallen, and they were standing beneath a large beech, its smooth bark reflected white in the moonlight. The rush of the millrace could be heard in the distance, and close at hand an owl hooted.

"You can't murder a woman simply by accusing her of being a witch."

"So you won't help me bring Farrell to justice?"

Will Pike ran a hand over his mouth. "The trouble lies more with the law, I fear, than the man who administered it. So long as there are only four pleas acceptable to the Crown—murder, robbery, arson, and rape—everything else falls to the local landowner. Farrell's job as a local JP is more about appeasing peasants and settling grudges than dispensing justice to villains. It's for his constable to nab thieves and lug them off to the assizes."

"Do you think I'm so stupid as to not understand that?" Eleanor fumed. "That I'm so fired up with anger that I can't be objective? Will Pike, the people of Sulborough Green are living so close to the bread line, they've almost fallen over the edge. Blaming Alizon Norton for their aches and pains, their sick cattle, their stillborn babies is unacceptable, but at least it's partway understandable. Half the scolds and gossips in England have been accused of witchcraft as payback by their local community! The difference is, they weren't roasted like chestnuts."

" 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' Exodus. Check with Parson Hardwicke, if you don't believe me. The Bible is left open at that very page in St. Jude's."

"Sucking in his thick lips as though he's permanently biting on a sour cherry, how else would you expect that sanctimonious creep to justify his actions? Have you seen him? Striding through the village, his skirts flapping like batwings and a prayer book tight in his hand, you'd think he was the epitome of goodness and love.

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The hell he is. You watch. Next week, it will be *'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord,'* and he'll honestly believe that excuses him. Will, that man has flints for eyes."

"Am I right in concluding that Parson Hardwicke was the prosecuting counsel at the trial?"

"All right, so I'm prejudiced," Eleanor admitted. "But a year in the jailhouse interspersed with the occasional outing to the pillory tends to settle most witchcraft allegations. Alizon Norton was burned at the stake."

"Standard lynch-mob behaviour," Will said sadly. "Act first, think later."

"Precisely what Farrell was banking on," she said. "He's in the perfect position to set the ball rolling, then whip up mass hysteria to such a pitch he could rush through the accusations, the confession, the trial, the execution. And another thing. Why didn't he call for the witchfinder?"

A sudden cold gripped her bones. Witchfinder. Witchpricker. Jobber. Brodder. Call him what you will, his task was to prove or disprove allegations of witchcraft. For which purpose he carried a special bodkin with which to probe the woman's flesh to find a place where it didn't bleed. *To discover the mark of the Devil . . .*

"You're shivering, Eleanor. What's wrong?"

Will drew her towards him, wrapping his strong arms round her body. In the moonlight, her auburn curls shone like molten metal, and she smelled of chamomile and thyme.

"Nothing," she said, but made no move to disengage herself from his embrace. "It's just the idea of the tortures—"

He placed one finger over her lips. "Try not to think about that."

"Easy for you to say, Will. Did you actually read the list of crimes that Alizon eventually confessed to? It wasn't just the odd sick cow or someone's back pains; by the time those bastards had finished, she'd admitted to everything from night flying to fornicating with the Devil. But that still didn't give them the right to cheer Alizon's screams as living flesh blistered and fell off her bones."

"There *were* grounds for execution," Will pointed out, gently brushing a wayward strand of hair away from her eyes. "Tom Shaw was found headfirst in a vat of his own boiling dye and since no one else was around at the time, and since he could not have just toppled in, it was argued that he had been pushed by the Devil. Just one day earlier, the whole village had heard Alizon curse him. It was their natural conclusion."

"Pacts with the Devil! This is nothing but propaganda, Will, put about by the church. An inversion of Christianity designed to feed off elemental human fears and make the people dependent upon the king and the clergy."

"For God's sake, Eleanor," he hissed. "Such talk is heresy and

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that *is* a burning offence. You know the king's obsession with demonology! He studies the subject, considers himself an authority. For your own safety, keep those views to yourself!"

"The only way I'd be in trouble would be if one of the king's agents happened to be around to report me," she said quietly. There was a beat of perhaps ten. *"Is he?"*

Will Pike stiffened. Licked his lips. "No one can hear you out here," he said tightly. "We're too far from the village, and in any case everyone there is asleep. They need all the rest they can get, before they rise for the fields at dawn."

Eleanor breathed out.

"However, while we're on the subject of executions," he said, looping his thumb in one of her curls, "the Witchcraft Act of sixteen-oh-four states that it is a 'hanging offence for the devilish act of witchcraft and, by the force of the same, killing or laming their neighbours or harming their cattle.' Unanimously, the jury found Alizon Norton guilty of killing Tom Shaw."

"Then why didn't Farrell have her choke on the gallows?" His earthy, juniper scent prickled her nostrils.

"Guessing," Will said, "I would imagine it was because he didn't want the news to go beyond the parish. Hanging a witch is not as common as people make out. As you said yourself, public humiliation usually suffices, but Farrell was in a difficult position. As far as the jury was concerned, and forgetting this business of incubi, succubi, and midnight flights with the Devil, what it boiled down to was that Alizon Norton killed Tom Shaw with sorcery."

"Balls."

In the darkness, Will Pike smiled. "As their landowner as well as their JP, I suspect Farrell found the quickest way to settle the unrest was to give the villagers what they asked for. The life of a stranger. Which is not to say he wanted a reputation for dispensing that kind of justice bandied about. He knew the people would be sick with contrition once it was over. Burning Alizon at the stake almost guaranteed it would be confined to the parish."

"Wrong. Farrell had her burned at the stake *because it was personal*. This is a mean and vicious way to kill someone by anybody's standards, but the worst thing of all is that Alizon's was a murder planned in cold blood. Jeremy Farrell will not get away with it, I assure you. So I'll ask you again, Will Pike. Are you going to help me?"

Another hot, blistering day dawned in the village of Sulborough Green. Blacksmith Wilkes, with his beetle brows and arms like barrels, had stopped to enquire about the health of the carpenter's wife. Inside, no doubt, the stiff-backed physician would be letting blood till the poor woman fainted, while outside his horse whin-

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nied softly and nibbled the grass. The thatchers were making good progress on the new roof next to the Magpie, and glass now shone proudly in four of the windows of the house being glazed, the remainder in place by tomorrow. Bessie Nokes, small and slender, was exchanging commiserations with Tom Shaw's widow, Jennet, both women sniffling into kerchiefs with the pain of their losses.

All these things Eleanor observed from the richly embroidered window seat in her chamber at the Thistle & Crown.

Parson Hardwicke, his long spider's legs eating up the ground as he made his morning rounds. Children playing leapfrog on the green, chasing pigeons, chalking out squares for games of hopscotch. The constable, squat and dour, kicking Martin Pepper, the resident drunk, who lay spread-eagled under the stocks, snoring. That was the old man who spoke up for Alizon, yet even he would not talk to Eleanor about the execution, clamming up just like the rest, despite the guineas she offered. Getting no response from the drunkard, the constable wasted no further time and moved on.

Now there was an unpopular job, mused Eleanor. Appointed by the local JP, the office was both obligatory and unpaid. It was the constable's role to evict tramps and vagabonds, for which the parish was grateful. But equally it was his duty to report misdemeanours, in other words to spy on his own, for which the parish was anything but! Generally, the post rotated annually between the various tradesmen of the parish, but were a particular individual to show aptitude for his duties, in all likelihood he would be reappointed the following Michaelmas. In cases like these, when the annual appointment becomes permanent, power invariably corrupts, especially in tight-knit communities. More than one rural constable had been found in a ditch with the back of his head caved in and the blame laid on vagrants who had never been caught. . . .

As the sun began to peep over the soft rolling downs, the first of the harvesters trudged off to their labours, scythes slung over their shoulders, hot loaves of rye in their packs. Bully for them, Eleanor thought, stretching. With a catlike yawn, she pattered back to her own comfy four-poster bed.

"What do you think Sir Geoffrey would say if he knew I had bedded his wife?" a sleepy voice asked.

She rolled her eyes. "All right. How did you know who I was?"

"For the simple reason that last year, Ellie, my love, I played at Dearborn Hall. You were so beautiful, with your rich auburn curls, that I composed a ballad in your honour. Milady, of course," he chuckled, "didn't even spare me a glance."

"Perhaps this," she whispered, walking her fingers slowly down his breastbone, lower, lower, lower, "will compensate for milady's omission?"

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Was that the best he could come up with? she wondered. Because had "Will Pike" played at Dearborn Hall, milady would have spared him more than a glance. In seven years with that doddery old fart, Geoffrey had not once succeeded in getting it up. A succession of grooms, footmen, and handsome troubadours more than compensated, however. And milady would definitely not have let this one slip through the net!

"Do you believe in witchcraft, Will Pike?" she asked later, when they were both lying, panting, on their backs from exertion.

"Convinced of it," he said. "You?"

"Definitely." God, that was good. The best yet. "But Alizon Norton, I assure you, was no witch. Frankly, Will, she wasn't bright enough. So why accuse her of something like that?"

"Why, for that matter, not lure her away from the village and kill her where the crime would have passed unnoticed? She was a stranger, newly arrived in Sulborough Green a matter of weeks previously. No one here would have given a second thought to her leaving suddenly."

Eleanor said nothing. She just lay staring up at the scarlet curtains above her.

"The idea of Jeremy Farrell killing Alizon through accusations of witchcraft is ridiculous, Ellie." Will rolled onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow. "Think about it. Farrell couldn't be sure he could carry it off, and anyway you haven't told me his motive for getting Alizon out of the way."

"I don't know it."

"Ellie!"

"Well, I don't," she said honestly. "Alizon left home at the age of sixteen and I haven't seen much of her since. Can't imagine what brought her to this dreary little backwater!"

"She was a widow, I understand."

"Let's just say my sister wasn't so fortunate in her marriage as I was."

Geoffrey Dearborn's wealth and influence could have secured him a bride among the landed gentry, yet it was the auburn-haired, flashing-eyed daughter of his own tailor that he had plumped for. And Eleanor, young as she was then, had known her worth.

Just as she knew the worth of a handsome, strong-backed lover who was as insatiable as he was considerate. She rolled on top of him and lifted her hips.

"Tipper Norton was a drunk and a bully, a gambler and a liar, and, as it transpired, a footpad as well," she panted. "They hanged him in Chichester, and good riddance."

"Chichester?" Will rasped, writhing with pleasure as her nails raked his skin. "Wasn't that where Parson Hardwicke was born?"

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"That reptile wasn't born, he was hatched," Eleanor gasped, and then gasped again.

"What's the matter?" Will was alarmed by her sudden stiffening. "Did I hurt you?"

By way of answer, Eleanor rolled away. "Goddammit, I should have realised. The bribes!"

Will slumped back on the plump feather mattress and groaned. "So close," he murmured. "So very, very close." He swiped his hands through his hair in frustration. "What bribes?"

"The people of Sulborough Green are dirt poor, yet we have a carpenter who can afford a physician, a house with glazed windows, a new thatch somewhere else, and there's a black foal running around in the paddock. Horses are a luxury in these parts, Will Pike." Eleanor was pulling on her petticoat. "In fact, wasn't it the carpenter who actually saw Alizon copulating with a cloven-hoofed beast in the churchyard at midnight?"

"His wife is very ill."

"Betray a life to spare a life? What kind of morality is that? He lied for money—and I thought those eight pieces of silver came from Jeremy Farrell. Of course it didn't. Farrell would not have been so obvious, there were other ways he could have enhanced their lives. *It was the priest.*"

Ruefully, he watched her cover her beautiful breasts with blue silk and felt a stab of desire as long russet curls tumbled over them.

"His dingy cassock is frayed and patched and his boots have gaping great holes in the soles. Where on earth would Hardwicke get that kind of money from?"

"Selling his church artefacts and putting the blame on vagabond thieves," she told him. "There was no robbery at all. I'll bet you a guinea to a goose there was no meeting with his bishop in May. That he took the stuff to London to sell it. I told you this killing was planned in advance." Eleanor squealed as warm hands cupped her breasts. "Will Pike, what the devil do you think you're doing?"

"This," he murmured. "And this. And oh yes, this as well." A slip of blue silk wafted to the floor. "Then, when we've finished what we started, I shall come with you to St. Jude's and we will tackle Parson Hardwicke together. I'm not letting you walk into danger on your own."

All in all, Eleanor felt that was a pretty good deal.

So much so that she did not offer a single squeak of protest when he removed her petticoat. Instead, she used it to tie his hands to the bedpost and revised her opinion of his performance in bed. No, she decided. *This* was the best yet. By a long way.

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For a man of the cloth, the parson knew some distinctly un-Christian terminology, but in the end he confessed everything. Sensible decision, on the whole.

Because it was either talk—or Eleanor fired the pistol aimed straight at his stomach.

No one who had met Eleanor Dearborn would think that she might be bluffing. From the moment she had come blazing into Sulborough Green and bearded Jeremy Farrell in his own council meeting, every man, woman, and dog in the parish had her pegged as a force to be reckoned with. They were right.

She gave the churchman a count of five before a "terrible accident" occurred in which the pistol her dear, sweet husband had given her for protection accidentally went off. Poor Parson Hardwicke. Such a good man, as well . . .

"One."

They were standing in the nave of St. Jude's. Thick stone walls ensured the church remained refreshingly cool, even in the height of the summer, although it would be perishingly cold inside in the winter. Green glass tinted the windows, adding to the summery feel, beeswax candles lined up like soldiers on parade on the altar, and Tull, the church tomcat, lay curled in a ginger ball on Jeremy Farrell's carved pew.

"Two."

While there's life, there's hope, she could see him reason, the sweat breaking out on his brow.

"Three."

Just as she could see that he was weighing up the pros and cons of snatching the pistol from her.

"Four."

"Stop!" There was panic in his voice. "Put it down, put it down."

The snout of the pistol remained level.

"Oh, God." Hardwicke slumped onto the front pew and buried his long, oval head in his hands.

His story was predictably one-sided. How, as a young curate in Chichester, he had been in love with—of all people—his bishop's niece. And of course the inevitable happened. Jane fell pregnant. But knowing the bishop would never countenance a marriage between a penniless curate and his niece, Hardwicke suggested the same course of action that the bishop himself (surely?) would have advised. That Jane pay a visit to a certain surgeon in London, who was known to abort children safely. Jane, unsurprisingly, was horrified. Refused to murder her own child, she said, how dare he even suggest it, and at that point, according to Hardwicke, she stepped backwards and caught her heel in her skirt at the top of the stairs. Frantically he reached out to save her, he said, but it

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was too late. By the time he reached the bottom, his beloved was dead. Her neck snapped like a hare's.

He panicked, he assured Eleanor.

If he ran, he would not be implicated in any way. If he stayed, his career and his reputation would be in ruins. Jane was dead, he had to consider his own interests, he whined.

"And that was when I first met Alizon Norton," he said mournfully.

Alizon had been a servant in the house, and whereas he believed everyone was out, Alizon had been confined to bed with a megrim. When the argument broke out, she got up to listen. She had seen everything, too. Including the young curate's crucifix clutched in Jane's stiffening hand. . . .

"By Alizon's reasoning," Hardwicke said, "this was proof positive that I had murdered the girl. Alizon threatened to go to the bishop, tell him about Jane's condition, the row over abortion, and that I had deliberately pushed my darling down the stairs. It was an accident, of course, but the way Alizon told it, it looked bad."

It *was* bad, Eleanor thought. Jane would not have reached out to clutch at her lover had she been tipping backwards. Her hands would have been outstretched to cushion her fall. Instead, she clutched at whatever she could to save her own life.

Hardwicke gulped at the unwavering pistol.

"She blackmailed me," he said. "Not money. I had none. But her husband was a criminal of the vilest order. Alizon demanded I give him an alibi from time to time, to save his neck from the gallows."

A year later, promotion brought Hardwicke here, to Sulborough Green. Three more years passed. Life settled into its rhythm.

"Naturally, during one of my visits to the bishop, I heard that Tipper Norton had finally got what he deserved. At last, the nightmare was over. I was free of that bitch's stranglehold on my life. Or so I thought."

He could not believe his eyes, he said, when she turned up in the village in May.

" 'Hello, Parson,' she said. Just like that. Calm as anything." Hardwicke wiped his ashen face with his hand, and Tull, the church tomcat, turned around in Jeremy Farrell's pew in his sleep. "With just two words, my world crumbled," he said thickly.

"She wanted money, I suppose?"

Money was the reason she married Tipper Norton. She imagined his thieving would keep her in luxury, when the reality was he gambled and drank away his ill-gotten gains, usually before it had gone fifty yards from his victims' purses.

"She knew about the chalices and the cross inlaid with jewels. 'Sell them,' she demanded. 'Then I swear you can have your cruci-

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fix back.' As if she meant to keep her promise, the blackmailing cow!"

"You could have sent her on her way. After all this time, there was no proof, only her word against yours."

"The damage was already done. At the time, there was some concern raised about bruising on Jane's body. Whether the bishop believed me or Alizon, I would have been tainted with suspicion. That would have ended my prospects. They would have stripped me of even this wretched parish. I would have been *ruined.*"

So he decided to kill her instead. In a way that left him totally blameless.

Witchcraft is a basic human fear. Shape-shifters, bloodsuckers, unnatural lusts. It was easy. Hardwicke sold the artefacts in London, making up some cock-and-bull story about thieves breaking in while he'd been visiting his bishop in Chichester, and spinning another tale to Alizon about how payment had been deferred temporarily. Then he set about bribing the more vulnerable and needy villagers. Like the carpenter, whose wife might live with the ministrations of an expensive physician—but who would have gone straight to her coffin otherwise. Alizon Norton is a witch, he would whisper. We all know she cursed Bessie Nokes's baby and I personally have listened to her satanic chants, seen her consort with the Devil. She must stand trial for witchcraft—but (and there is always a but) it would add strength to the church in its fight against evil if others had witnessed her wickedness. If anyone else could add weight to the case, then naturally the church would reward their bravery and courage in stepping forward.

When prices were outstripping wages, the temptation was too great to resist. The witch was denounced. Selling the idea to Jeremy Farrell had been easy, too, he explained. He simply reported the mood of the villagers, so that by the time Farrell saw for himself the crowds jeering and screaming outside the place where Alizon was under arrest, he needed no further convincing. JPs are no less removed from the terrors of Satanism than anyone else.

"Why kill Tom Shaw?" Eleanor asked.

"Expedience." He shrugged. "He'd made a pass at Alizon the day before—pawing at her in the alley behind the Magpie—and the world and his wife heard what she called him. Next day, I asked him to show me how he boiled his dyes . . . and tipped him in. He died instantly."

Of course, none of the villagers saw anything out of the ordinary. Who notices a priest on his rounds? He is as much a part of the scenery as the cows and the pigs and chickens—

"What I can't understand is why Alizon didn't denounce you straight away," Eleanor said. "From the minute she was arrested."

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A small, smug smile twitched at his mouth. "That was the clever part," the cleric said. "She, too, believed it was the village rising up against her, and I did nothing to dispel her fears. Instead, I told her, be patient, I would speak to Farrell on her behalf. I might despise her, I said, for blackmailing me, but it was my duty to God to see justice served, regardless of personal feelings."

In fact, he did nothing. And by the time of her trial, Alizon Norton was incoherent. He could stand up and prosecute without repercussions.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked, lifting his flinty eyes to Eleanor Dearborn's. "Denounce me? The word of a rambling, grief-stricken sister against that of a respected clergyman?"

"Ah." Eleanor smiled radiantly at the parson. "It is possible that I may have misled people on that particular matter. Alizon was not actually my sister. In fact, we weren't even related."

"What?" His jaw dropped. "Then . . ."

"Why am I here?" Her smile broadened. "Let's call it a vested interest, shall we?"

Eight months ago, Alizon had come to her for training. She had heard there was money to be made in the business of potions and charms and incantations, and Alizon, bless her, was a hard girl when it came to the readies. Eleanor quickly put her straight, though. Witchcraft, she told her, was no means to get rich.

At least not directly. Not unless you use your powers to hook yourself a rich husband.

And besides. As she had quite rightly told Will (or whatever his name was), Alizon was not bright enough to pick up the trade. You had to have a proper bent for that line of work. A vocation.

"There are some of us, you see, who don't approve of our sisters being hanged willy-nilly, much less burned. It troubles us."

Hardwicke clenched at his stomach. "God in heaven," he breathed.

"He may well be," Eleanor acknowledged. "But we don't believe in him any more than we believe in the Devil. What we practise is the art of healing and the promotion of well-being—interspersed, of course, with redressing what I can only describe as the occasional *imbalance.*"

His face was white, and streaming with sweat. "My God," he muttered. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing," she said, putting the pistol back in her soft velvet bag. "The ale you drank when you came home from your rounds. Tasted a little strange, did it not? Bitter?"

Eleanor knew that on a hot day like today, he'd swill down the beer she'd seen his housekeeper fetch from the Thistle & Crown for when he returned. How easy to add a small potion.

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Gargling in the back of his throat, the parson clawed at his stomach.

"Don't bother to see me out," she trilled as he slumped onto the floor, startling Tull. "And if there is a Devil, do give him my regards, won't you?"

As she closed the door, the draught blew the pages of the Bible from Exodus to some obscure reference in Leviticus.

Up in her bedchamber in the Thistle & Crown, Eleanor packed away the last of her clothes. Outside the window, four horses snickered irritably. The ostler was not there to soothe them and the groom was too busy nursing his bruises to bother. The groom couldn't understand it. The stonemason *never* left his workplace until dark. For that matter, the stonemason was equally bemused. He had just bidden a cheerful "Good day" to the redheaded stranger when he was gripped by this sudden urge to go home—

"This will get me fired, you know. Dereliction of duty."

Eleanor leaned across the bed and checked the knots of her petticoats binding Will Pike's hands to the post. "You'll survive," she said, running her hands lightly over his naked, muscular body.

Across the green, windows were glazed, roofs thatched, Bessie Nokes's grief was lessened and would be lessened further next time, when she gave birth to bouncing twin sons. Although that would not be for another eleven months yet. She must have time to grieve properly before rejoicing in her new pregnancy.

"Suppose there had been any danger?"

"Well, there wasn't," she said soothingly. "I told you, the parson wasn't at home and I decided that you were probably right, after all. Forgive and forget, and let go."

"Hmm." His patrician nose wrinkled. "There's something decidedly fishy about all this."

"Apart from your name?" She laughed. "Will *Pike,* indeed!"

She leaned over and kissed him with genuine regret. Pity. She liked men with wit, intelligence, courtesy, and compassion.

"I shall miss you," he said, his dark curls shining in the rays of the sun as his hands strained at the knots. "Perhaps, God willing, our paths will cross again in the future."

"I doubt that, Will Pike." She inhaled one last breath of his juniper scent to carry home with her to Winchester. "But if it's any consolation, I shall miss you, too."

She had known from the outset that he was King James's man, although she had taken him for a common spy. Except he, too, had come to investigate the unauthorised execution.

Eleanor knew this because—in his pack—she had found a small, sharp, pointed bodkin. . . . ●

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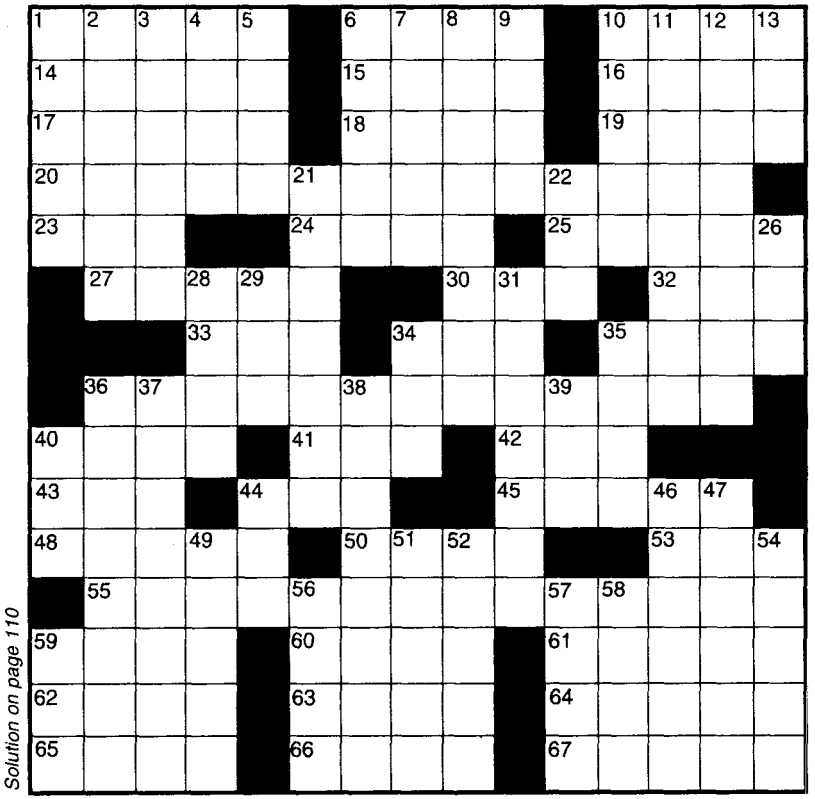
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

One of the "Eight Million Ways to Die"

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 110

ACROSS

1. Syrian President Hafez al ____
6. Follows clear or appear
10. Try
14. Ms. Street
15. *The Dark* ____, Minette Walters
16. Comes after siete
17. Diarist Nin
18. Sea eagle
19. Sheltered
20. Sleuth in 55 across

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23. Fr. holy woman
24. Mrs. "Avenger"
25. Rinse, for one
27. Road curves
30. "____was going to St. Ives"
32. Coat
33. Skill
34. A Gabor
35. Puerto ____
36. Author of 55 across, also *EQMM*'s "A Moment of Wrong Thinking" (April 2002)
40. Reos
41. Debtor's note
42. Some deg.s
43. Farming, abbr.
44. Precedes corn or form
45. Vast chasm
48. Lock
50. Chair
53. Earl Grey or Darjeeling
55. Ice pick murder case for 36 across
59. Feed the kitty
60. Monthly payment
61. *A ____ in Deep Water*, Doug Allyn
62. Notion
63. Not in port
64. Senior
65. Skin, comb. form
66. Sheriff's badge
67. Approaches

DOWN

1. Deborah ____, who reports on the crime in Jesus Creek, Tenn.
2. Washington group
3. Lists of candidates
4. Landed
5. Élan
6. ____ there yet?
7. Scandinavians
8. Private meeting
9. Ostrich's relative, var.
10. Sycophant
11. Selecting
12. Mycroft's brother
13. ____ the line
21. British sculptor of celebrated heads, Sir Jacob ____
22. 7th century date
26. Self
28. Sayings
29. Stray
31. Seventh day
34. Old French coin
35. ____-fingered Dawn
36. City in NE Oregon
37. Morse at times
38. Loudest
39. Where Kay Scarpetta works
40. *Seeing a Large* ____, Elizabeth Peters
44. NATO member
46. Doesn't ____ chance
47. College in Macon, GA
49. Kind of iron or engine
51. Nine, Gr.
52. Fragrant floral oil
54. 19th c. American sculptor of "Dead Pearl Diver," Benjamin
56. Bikini parts
57. First place
58. Valley
59. Abet

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BOTTOM WALKER

by James Powell

Faith Clifford, a thin woman in her mid forties with glasses and short-cut hair, sat reading in a plastic chair on the little brick patio outside the kitchen door. She hoped to take back some color from the shallow sunshine when she returned to her teaching job in the city tomorrow, and wore a light throw over her legs against the autumn air.

Soon her father shouldered his way out through the metal storm door carrying a kitchen chair in each hand. He shook his head when she moved to get up to hold the door. Faith knew he had come outside to be with someone. Her mother Clara's sudden death two years before had left him a lonely man and he mourned her still. "Clarabelle," that had been his name for her from the very first, even before his older brother Arthur went courting her; "Clarabelle" because she taught school close by and used a hand bell to call the children in from recess.

George Clifford was a large-boned man who, at the age of seventy-three, was developing that stoop tall people often do. He sat down on one chair, crossed his ankles on the other, and closed his eyes.

When he had settled in, Faith glanced over at him. She had never been close to her father. He was, in everything except her mother, whom he adored, a very self-centered man. His face, though sunken now around the mouth and stubbled cheeks, still bore traces of an early handsomeness. When the wind touched his longish white hair and the collar of his flannel shirt Faith saw her mother's tidying hand.

A Canadian by birth, James Powell has long resided in Marietta, Pennsylvania, a town that lends many features to his fictional settings. In this new story, he explains, "The water supply system described is more or less the way things were and now are in Marietta. The diver's helmet is in the town museum and the cement bunker, long abandoned, I came upon during one of my walks along the river."

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Without Clara there, Faith and her father had little in common. He was no more interested in her job or her life back in the city than she in his antique rifles and black-powder hunting. But when she could, Faith drove down for a weekend to see how he was and do housecleaning, for he insisted he could not afford to have someone come in. He was, in his own way, a tidy man, keeping abreast of the dishes and the pots and pans. But he didn't go looking for work. It was left to her to take care of the curtains and the windows, turn the mattresses and vacuum under the beds, and wash the woodwork. She did not begrudge him the effort.

The river sparkled through the trees beyond the railroad tracks. Above the trees stood the sooty hills on the other bank. Years ago the town water had come from a spring-fed reservoir in those hills by means of a pipe laid across the river bottom. Twice a year Mr. Evans, the water-company maintenance man, inspected the pipe, walking its length in a steel diver's helmet fed with oxygen from a boat which hovered above him like a cloud. For the boys in town, his was the most exciting job around. Today the water came from a nearby artesian well. The diver's helmet sits on a stand in the water-company office and appears on its letterhead. Faith's father had been the last man to wear it.

Clifford had gone with the water company right out of high school. Some said it was because Mr. Evans had put in for retirement. Clifford's lawyer father had been furious, calling him a headstrong young fool. And her father may have come to regret what he'd done. After his ninth trip across the river bottom, the water company drilled the artesian well outside of town and sold the land across the river to a developer. It wasn't much of a job without the diver's helmet, and even less so when they went to metered water and Clifford had to walk through town once a month logging meter readings in a book. But by that time his brother Arthur was dead, and he was married to his Clarabelle.

As long as Faith could remember, her father had been a silent, watchful man who kept his own counsel. It was only around his wife that he found his tongue. Clara was his life's center, and her esteem meant everything to him. So when she complained that at family gatherings he stood in the corner as dumb as a cigar-store Indian he gave the matter considerable thought. Then, taking his cue from a cousin who always did tricks with pieces of string at these get-togethers, and Aunt Helen who sang show tunes from the piano, Clifford put together a repertoire of long, elaborate stories, set pieces all the regulars came to know because he repeated them word for word and gesture for gesture. Here he would hunch up and warm his palms at the fire his grandfather built the winter they got lost in the woods. There he would cup his hands to shelter an imaginary match he shared with his older brother

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Arthur. "Arthur's last cigarette ever," he never forgot to observe. Long after Clifford gave up smoking—Clara had decided it was a smelly, unhealthy habit—he still paused at that same place to inhale deeply and, later, brush cigarette ash from his knee.

Once, as they did the dishes together, Faith's mother smiled and told her, "Your father rehearsed them, those stories of his. I'd see him pacing out in the backyard, his lips moving, his index finger jabbing the air to make a point, a hand raised to his forehead in astonishment at the size of the bass my Uncle Trevor caught to win the fishing derby in nineteen thirty-nine."

Hard as it was to believe, her father even turned Clara's death into a story, using Faith in the telling. A crash in the middle of the night brought him running out of the bedroom. "There was my Clarabelle lying at the bottom of the stairs, dead of a broken neck."

Their family physician, who pronounced her dead, insisted he'd cautioned her that her blood-pressure medicine could cause dizziness. But Clifford always waved Dr. Kraus's words away. "It wasn't high blood pressure making her head spin," he insisted. "It was her always dredging up the past. What's done is done. You can't change it."

Then he would hold out his wrists side by side as if to be bound. "No, what killed her, if the truth be told, was the man who speaks to you now. So go ahead. Lock me up and throw away the key. But before you do, hear me out.

"You all know how my wife was. She always wanted perfection. But you can't have perfection in a house, certainly not in an old one. In fact, and my daughter the scholar will back me up on this, people in the Far East believe nothing is perfect but their Allah. So even the builders there have a tradition of leaving some small part of every building unfinished out of respect for Divine perfection.

"Well, Clarabelle had this laundry list of things she wanted me to do, last but not least being," he raised a finger significantly and added a bit of a falsetto to what came next, " 'George, will you never fix the squeaky board at the top of the stairs?'

"So, over time I worked through everything on her list," Clifford continued, "saving that squeaky floorboard for the last. I didn't even tell her. I wanted it to be a surprise. That was a mistake. My mistake." He beat his breast with a gentle fist. "My guess is here's what happened. She woke up in the night and set out for the kitchen to make a cup of tea without bothering to turn the light on. We never did so as not to wake each other up. God knows it's a small enough house. It wasn't like you were going to get lost.

"When she didn't hear the squeaky board, she didn't think she was at the top of the stairs yet. So she took one step too many and

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down she went." He hung his head. "I'm to blame. I'm guilty as charged."

Sitting out there on the patio with the forgotten book in her lap, it occurred to Faith how different her father's stories were from the ones her mother used to tell her at bedtime. When Faith knew a story by heart, her mother would throw in little changes, a fourth Little Pig, Little Green Riding Hood, Puss in Shoes. It was a game they played. Faith was supposed to catch the changes and make her mother tell the stories correctly.

But her father's stories never changed, although in recent years a failing memory sometimes made him lose his way. He would stop in mid sentence, go pale like an actor who's forgotten his lines, and furrow his brow until he found them again.

Once, on a visit home, Faith had been in the kitchen with her mother when she thought she heard voices in the living room. Thinking they had visitors, she put down the dish towel and went in to say hello. There was her father sitting alone, telling the story of getting lost in the woods with his grandfather to an empty room.

Back in the kitchen her mother explained, "He's gotten so forgetful he's started rehearsing again. To get his stories straight. For tomorrow's get-together at your aunt's." She smiled as if she thought her husband's effort sweet. Faith still remembered that beautiful smile.

Now Clifford recrossed his ankles and, out of the blue, said, "It was on a day like today my brother Arthur met his death."

Faith took up her book again. He always started the story that way, no matter the weather or the season. Actually, it had been spring. Arthur and Clara were to be married that September when he finished college. She would keep on teaching to get him through medical school.

"When I was a boy," her father continued, "way back before they invented garbage collectors, people just trotted their trash down to the bottom of the street and pitched it on the river shore the way their parents did." He brushed one palm against the other. "Good riddance to bad rubbish. The spring flood carried everything off. Back then, the river wasn't a polite place to go because of all the rats. But you couldn't keep Arthur and me away from it. And sometimes, after a flood, we earned pocket money finding decoys and returning them to their owners. I'm not talking plastic decoys here. Who'd put his name on one of those?

"The flooding came late that year. One Saturday afternoon, with Arthur on spring break from college and me with a half-day off from the water company, we decided to go down and give the river a look.

"There was a spot we liked near a bend in the river. In flood, it was a good mile across there. In among the trees things ran slow.

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But near the far shore where the deep channel was, the water raced along with its cargo of trees, logs, and those metal drums people make docks out of. You got dizzy watching.

"Shore trees are usually more height than root, quick to topple and take their neighbors with them. So there was this tangle of dead trees that extended out maybe fifty or sixty feet from where we were standing, the far branches bobbing in the current. And snagged among them was the nose of a skiff which had broken loose somewhere, turned turtle, and found its way down there.

" 'Georgie-Porgie,' said Arthur, using my nickname when we were kids, 'that skiff has my name all over it!' And he jumped up onto two narrow tree trunks, and with a leg on each, out he started."

It took Faith a moment to realize why she'd looked up from her book. Her father had left something out, the part where he shared a match to light his brother's cigarette, Arthur's last cigarette ever, the part where he tried to persuade his brother not to risk going after the skiff.

Faith opened her mouth to correct him, but closed it again and listened to the strange new words.

"He hadn't gone six feet," her father continued, "when this hell of a great tree rounded the bend in the river like a ship in full sail. Then it caught on something underwater and swung in sharply. Arthur saw it coming and hopped back down to the ground. The tree scoured off twenty feet of dead wood. When it moved on that skiff was gone. A couple of minutes earlier and Arthur would have been gone, too.

"As we stood there watching the tree float out of sight I told myself truth is stranger than fiction. The story I'd cooked up to tell was that he'd gone out after a string of duck decoys. But a skiff was better.

" 'Time to get back,' says Arthur at last. 'Not yet,' I said as per my plan. 'I got something to show you.' So he shrugged and followed me.

"A bit farther upriver we came to water-company land. I led him through the underbrush to where there was this cement bunker in the ground with iron rungs leading down to the shut-off valve for the water pipe from the reservoir across the river. A heavy metal door lay flat across the opening. I unlocked the padlock and swung the door open and pointed down into the darkness. 'Look,' I said. When he leaned over to see, I grabbed the length of pipe I'd hidden in the weeds. 'Look at what?' he asked, starting to straighten up. That's when I laid that pipe across the back of his head as hard as I could. He never moved after he hit the bottom of the bunker.

"I padlocked the door again and ran back to town. I told them about the skiff and that tree coming around the bend and sweeping

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Arthur away. They found the skiff later on another snag. They never found him, not even after the river fell and they could search the backwaters and eddies where bodies tend to show up.

"Sunday, early, I lugged the body further upstream and buried him. Poor Arthur. It's bad luck to get greedy. He wanted medical school and my Clarabelle, too." Here her father stopped talking and seemed to doze.

Faith sat stiff with horror. Until that final moment she might have denied the truth of this new version of a much-told story. But she knew how obsessive his love for his Clarabelle was. Faith could imagine him capable of killing anyone who tried to take her from him. Then why not Arthur, who stood in his way? One Saturday fifty years ago the old man stretched out beside her had killed his own brother. Her father was a murderer.

As if he sensed her thoughts, Clifford's head snapped up. Like a man afraid he had spoken dark thoughts out loud he turned to see if he'd been overheard. His confused eyes focused hard when he found Faith looking at him. "You were dreaming," she said, his eyes making the lie come quickly. "You spoke Mommy's name. You said, 'Clarabelle.'"

Clifford relaxed, breathing easier. He nodded. "She's never out of my dreams," he said, adding, "That sun's warm when the breeze stops." He settled himself again and closed his eyes.

In a moment, Faith resolved, she would stand up and go back into the house. Then she would pack her things, leave him a note with some pretext or other, and return to the city. And she would never come back.

But as she closed her book the wind returned to touch her father's hair, making Faith think of her mother again. And she remembered another visit home just before her mother's death when she had seemed downcast and distracted. Once, after dinner, when the two of them were in the kitchen, Faith had nodded toward the window onto the patio where her father sat talking to himself. "Rehearsing again," she said and turned, hoping she had called up that beautiful smile with which her mother had once rewarded her husband's effort. As quickly as her mother looked away, Faith still saw stark desolation in her eyes.

Now Faith felt a new horror building on the first. Suppose the true story which she had just heard had slipped out before, with her mother there. How could George Clifford bear it, his Clarabelle knowing that he'd murdered Arthur? Faith decided not to go back into the house. She sat there waiting. After a while, her father shifted himself to get more comfortable. Then, fighting to keep her voice steady, she asked, "Daddy?" He grunted vaguely. "Daddy," she said, as casually as she could, "tell me again how Mommy died." ●

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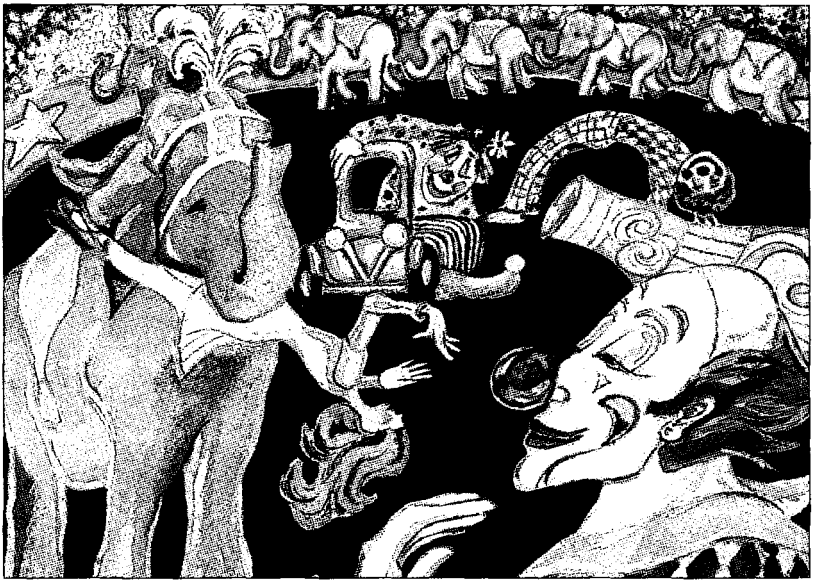

Art by June Levine

ONE MORE CIRCUS

by Edward D. Hoch

"There's nothing terribly challenging about it," Father Mallory was saying as he sat in the cramped study of David Noone's rectory at Holy Trinity Church. "After all, it's just one more circus."

"For you, maybe. For me it'll be like three days in the jungle."

Father Mallory chuckled. "You won't be ministering to the animals, Dave, only to the circus workers. Think of them as your parishioners. That's what I do."

David Noone had known Mike Mallory most of his life, since they'd roomed together at the seminary. Mike's parish was some fifty miles away in the next city, but they still managed to get together for lunch or dinner about once a month. At a time when the Catholic Church in America was besieged by an acute shortage of priests, Mike had the good fortune to have a hard-working assistant pastor willing to take over when he was on the road tending his other flock. He'd been chaplain to some ten thousand circus workers for the past seven years, traveling the country more than a hundred days a year to celebrate Mass and perform weddings,

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baptisms, and occasional funerals. Now, though, he had a problem.

"My mother's going in for surgery next week," he'd told David. "I have to be there for her, and I'm expected out in Montana at the Breen Brothers circus. I have several priests around the country who help me out. But no one in that area. If I paid your airfare, could you fly out there for three days? It would be next Monday to Thursday. You wouldn't miss any Sunday Masses."

"Couldn't you just postpone your visit?" David asked.

"I haven't seen them all year and the rest of my schedule is pretty full. Besides, the human cannonball and his wife have a new baby to be baptized."

"The human cannonball."

"He's really a nice guy. You'll like him."

In the end, David Noone agreed. After all, it was just one more circus.

"One More Circus" is the fifth Edward D. Hoch story about Father David Noone, a clerical sleuth "in the manner," critic Francis M. Nevins says, "of G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown." The first Noone story was published in 1964 in *The Saint*, and though most of Mr. Hoch's series characters have found an exclusive home at *EQMM*, we have never before published a Father Noone case. ✝

The human cannonball's wife met the plane at the Helena Regional Airport the following Monday morning. Her name was Grace Smart and she greeted him with a warm embrace that startled him just a bit. "You must be Father Noone. Father Mike phoned and told us all about you." She seemed to realize her embrace had embarrassed him and apologized. "You know circus people. We show our emotions. I'm just so thrilled that you've come all this way for Amanda's baptism."

She was a slender, attractive woman still in her twenties, with long jet-black hair and a half-hidden tattoo on one shoulder. "I'm pleased to help out Father Mike. He's an old friend. Are you a performer like your husband?"

She laughed as they headed for the baggage claim. "I'm not a human cannonball if that's what you mean, but I'd like to be. I was a trapeze artist until I got pregnant. I'm thinking of going back to it but I can't decide. Being a mother changes things."

David's bag was one of the first off the carousel. Though it was the state capital, Helena attracted relatively few visitors when the Legislative Assembly wasn't in session. He followed Grace Smart

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out to a little rental car and asked how far it was to the circus. "We're set up halfway between Helena and Butte. That way we can draw our audience from both cities. They're both pretty small by themselves. It's only about thirty-five miles from here, which is like around the corner in Montana."

"Big Sky Country."

"You got it." She pulled out of the parking lot as if she'd been driving in the state all her life.

"Are you from around here, Grace?"

"Not really. I'm second-generation circus folk, born in Florida during the winter season. But we come here on the tour every year. The bigger circuses avoid places like this, but we do a nice business." She glanced sideways at him. "You're new to this, aren't you?"

"New to the circus, not the priesthood. How'd you know?"

"Father Mike told me when he called. Said to be kind to you. No confessions about sex on the trapeze."

"Is that what you circus people do?"

She laughed. "You'll find out."

The drive south along Route 15 was a sparkling panorama of forests and mountains, bathed in a clear crisp sunshine that made David more aware than ever of God's country. By the time the big top came into view near a town named Boulder, he felt he'd been transplanted to another world. "I didn't know circuses still performed in tents."

"They do out here. The auditorium shows are just for the larger cities." She pulled the car into a parking lot still muddy from recent rain and slipped between a bus and a tractor-trailer. "The show starts in an hour. I'll try to introduce you to some folks now and you can meet the rest of us at dinner tonight."

There were certainly people to meet—roustabouts who erected the tents and cared for the animals and equipment, trapeze artists and bareback riders, lion tamers and clowns, and, finally, Grace Smart's husband.

Though he was called the human cannonball on the circus posters, he was really just a muscular man in his thirties named Bernie Flint. He was shorter than David and spoke with a surprisingly deep voice. "Pleased to meet you, Father Dave," he said, putting down his cigarette so they could shake hands. "It always lifts our spirits when a chaplain's around for a few days."

David smiled. "It's a new experience for me but I'm glad to help out where I can."

"We'll get you a house seat in the first row," Grace told him. "You can see the entire show with our business manager."

"One of the Breen Brothers?"

"They're long retired. The circus has passed through two owners since then. The present owner rarely appears, but our business

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manager, Ronnie Perkins, travels with us. Come on, I'll introduce you. He's going to be Amanda's godfather."

Perkins was a middle-aged man with gray hair and a face that seemed to wrinkle like an accordion when he smiled. "Come on, Father," he urged. "You're sitting with me."

The big top was almost full when the afternoon performance got under way just after two. The ringmaster, all in white, led the opening parade on a white horse, followed by a bevy of bareback riders in spangled tights. Then there were the acrobats, clowns, and a line of elephants, lions, and tigers in wheeled cages, cowboys on horseback, trapeze artists, more clowns riding in a tiny car, and, finally, the long cannon from which Grace Smart's husband would be fired.

"The human cannonball is our final act," Perkins explained. "It's a great closer."

"What happens if Bernie Flint isn't up to it for every performance?" David wondered. "Even human cannonballs must catch an occasional flu bug."

The gray-haired business manager laughed. "Hasn't happened yet, but we were a bit worried when Grace went into labor last month. Bernie has been training a young fellow as his understudy, but so far we haven't needed him."

David sat back and enjoyed the show, laughing at the antics of stilt-walking clowns and smiling at the pleasure on the children's faces as other clowns made simple balloon animals to pass out. He was thrilled by the lion tamer and watched in awe as the trapeze artists and the high-wire walker performed above their heads. Ninety minutes later, when one of the clowns pressed the button to launch Bernie Flint through the air from a cannon that belched smoke and flame, he stood and cheered like everyone else.

Later he ate with the performers and other circus people in the dining tent, surprised to see how many there were. Over one hundred performers were backed by an equal number of circus workers, and when he rose to speak to them after the meal it was indeed like addressing the congregation back at Holy Trinity.

"Good evening, folks. As many of you know, I'm Father David Noone, filling in for Father Mike while his mother has surgery. I hope you'll all remember her in your prayers. I'll be here until Thursday. We'll have Mass each morning at eight, and during tomorrow's service I'll be baptizing Grace and Bernie's new baby daughter Amanda. Naturally I'll be available for confessions and even weddings if you're planning any. If you're not Catholic I invite you to come around anyway just to chat. I want to get to know more about you during my brief stay."

One of the clowns, a young fellow named Russ Minor, introduced himself after dinner, as did several of the others. A spangled bareback rider, Jeanne Gaffney, was from David's hometown. "When I

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visited my grandmother she'd take me to Holy Trinity on Sundays," she told him. "But that was probably before your time."

"I've been there quite awhile. Do you ever get back?"

She shook her head. "Not since Grandma's funeral ten years ago."

His memory stirred. "Was her name Gaffney, too? Rose Gaffney?"

"That was her!"

"A fine woman. Came to daily Mass as long as she was able."

They chatted a bit longer and then Grace came by with her arm around the shoulders of a sandy-haired young man barely out of his teens. "Father, I want you to meet Sam Tildon. He's in training to be the next human cannonball."

"Is that so?" David shook his hand. "How do you train for something like that?"

"Very carefully," he replied with a grin. "The trick is in the landing. You can break something or even kill yourself if you miss the net or hit it at the wrong angle. The first thing Bernie told me about the job was that more than thirty cannonballs have been killed over the years."

Grace squeezed his shoulder. "I keep telling Bernie he has new responsibilities now that he's a dad. He should turn the job over to someone else."

There was no evening performance on Monday night, when some of the acts practiced their routines. It was Bernie Flint who sought out David and suggested showing him how the cannon operated. The lights were on in the big top. Overhead, a couple of trapeze performers were limbering up. Bernie pointed out a big red firing button and a pressure gauge at the back. "Sam Tildon and I are the only ones allowed to monkey with the gauge. And nobody presses the firing button except the head clown as part of his routine." He mounted a ladder to the cannon's mouth and invited David to follow him.

"You see, Father, I climb into this cylinder that slides down to a catapult at the bottom. It's blasted forward by compressed air, not gunpowder. The cylinder stops at the mouth of the cannon, setting off some fireworks for noise and smoke, but I keep going into that net. Several human cannonballs have been killed by missing the net."

"Grace tells me you're training Sam Tildon to take your place."

"Someday, maybe, not yet. That's more Grace's idea than mine." He sighed as they climbed back down the ladder. "Look, Father, I'm not a Catholic like Grace. I don't go to confession or any of that stuff. But I need someone to talk to."

David smiled. "I'm your man."

They walked over to sit in two of the ringside seats. "Maybe you've already noticed that Grace likes to flirt with men. I suppose it's part of being in show business, always playing to an audience. Lately that audience has been Sam Tildon. Father, I think she may have

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slept with him last spring and I don't know what to do about it. Now that she's had our baby the whole thing is starting over again."

"Do you still love her, Bernie?"

"Of course I do. More than ever, now that we have Amanda. It's so great that you came all the way out here to baptize her."

"Talk to Grace, try to clear the air between you. This could be just a misunderstanding on your part."

"I wish that was true."

"Occasionally, after giving birth, women feel unwanted, unattractive to men. It's a special time when Grace most needs some loving tenderness from you. If she finds it, she won't need to look elsewhere." They talked a bit longer until David felt he'd been of some comfort to the man. He remembered Grace's arm around Tildon's shoulders and knew there might be some foundation to her husband's suspicions.

Later, Ronnie Perkins, the business manager, told him there was a cot for him in the clown tent. "Will that be all right?" he asked. "Otherwise you can sleep in my trailer."

"The clown tent will be fine," David assured him.

He found himself sleeping next to Russ Minor, the young clown who'd introduced himself earlier. It turned out that he was the head clown, whatever that position entailed, and it was Minor who shook him awake in the morning. "Didn't hear the alarm, did you, Padre?"

David opened his eyes and realized with a start that most of the others were already up and dressed. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty. You got a Mass in half an hour."

"So I have," David agreed, rolling off the cot. "Those things are pretty comfortable."

The young clown laughed. "It's the fresh air up here. Makes you sleep like a baby."

David washed quickly and donned his vestments. He took the mensa, or altar stone, from his suitcase along with the chalice, unconsecrated hosts, and a small bottle of sacramental wine. By eight o'clock he was ready to begin Mass. Almost everyone from the circus was in the big-top seats as he did the opening readings. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn't because they were all Catholics but rather because he would be baptizing Amanda Flint at this Mass.

"Today," he told them in his sermon, "we will be welcoming the newest member of our community—God's community and the circus community. Amanda Flint will grow up among you, perhaps even join you someday as her mother has. We each must serve the Lord in our own way, and you have chosen to do it by bringing joy and wonder to children and adults alike. I can only commend you on your work, and on the tremendous talent I see before me.

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Father Mike sends you his blessing, and I add mine. May the Lord be with you all."

Grace Smart brought Amanda forward after the sermon and David baptized her from a basin of lukewarm water. Bernie was at her side, and Ronnie Perkins acted as godfather. Jeanne Gaffney, the bareback rider, was godmother. As David held Amanda up to the congregation they applauded to welcome her. Afterward there was much good will around the breakfast tables, though David noticed that Bernie and Sam Tildon exchanged no words. It was up to Grace to bring Sam into the conversation, and at one point she even gave him the baby to hold while she went for more food. Bernie frowned but said nothing.

There was an afternoon performance that day, and following the extended baptismal breakfast some of the acrobats and jugglers went into the main tent for rehearsals. David, dressed casually in black pants and a sport shirt, moved freely among them, stopping now and then to consult with someone having a special problem. Despite the exotic life of the circus, he found their everyday troubles to be not that much different from those of his own parishioners.

At one point he noticed Sam Tildon at the far end of the tent, loading fresh fireworks around the rim of the cannon's mouth. It seemed the perfect time to speak with him. "How's it going, Sam?"

He glanced down from the top of the ladder. "Hi, Father. Enjoying your circus days?"

"They're everything Father Mike promised. Think you'll be trying the cannonball one of these days?"

"I hope so. Grace wants Bernie to let me try once. I've done it in practice but never before an actual audience."

"You're friendly with Grace, aren't you?"

"She's great. I love her."

It was only a manner of speaking, but under the circumstances it bothered David. "I know she's a bit of a flirt, but she and Bernie have a happy marriage."

"Sometimes it's not as happy as it seems," Sam muttered.

"What does that mean?"

The young man shrugged. "He's twelve years older than Grace. That's a big difference at her age. They don't agree on important things."

"Like what?"

"Now that Amanda's a month old, Grace wants to go back on the trapeze. Bernie thinks it's too dangerous. He wants her to give it up."

"That's a decision they should make together. They don't need you taking sides, Sam."

"I know," he said, not sounding as if he meant it.

"Leave it alone," David advised.

"I love her, Father," he said again with anguish in his eyes.

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Before David could say more they were interrupted by Russ Minor. "Father Dave, I've got a great idea for this afternoon. Come along with me in the clown parade."

He could only laugh at the idea. "I'm no clown, Russ, despite what some of my parishioners might think."

"Come on! I'll give you a wig and a little greasepaint. No one will know you're a priest."

David peered at Sam Tildon for help. "Go ahead and do it, Father! I did it once. It's sort of an initiation rite."

He could see there was no comfortable way out. "All right, I'll try anything once. I suppose it beats being shot out of a cannon."

An hour before the afternoon show David joined Russ in the clown tent, where he was outfitted with a baggy polka-dotted jumpsuit and large clown shoes. Minor sat him down and applied big red lips and red circles on each cheek. A multicolored fright wig completed the transformation, and David could barely look at himself in the mirror.

"Where do we march?" he asked.

"In front of the elephants."

"Is that wise?"

"Wiser than behind the elephants," Minor replied, patting him on the arm. When the opening parade began, David was lined up with the clowns, walking as they pranced along, limiting his antics to greeting children in the front rows and passing out some of the balloon animals. The half-dozen elephants following along certainly kept him moving. Later, after he'd washed off the greasepaint and removed the costume and wig, he went out to watch the lion tamer at work.

At the end of the show, after Russ Minor pressed the button to fire Flint once more from his cannon, David found himself with Jeanne Gaffney, comforting one of the other bareback riders who feared she might be pregnant. They had a long, private conversation about the baby's future if the pregnancy was confirmed, and David gave her the phone number of someone to call. "If you don't want the child," he told her, "there are plenty of people who do."

"You've been a big help," the young woman told him. "Whatever happens, I'll let you know."

"I'd appreciate that." He watched while the young woman walked away, past the jugglers rehearsing their routines. The big top seemed never to be empty, and he saw Tildon checking the cannon again.

They did an evening show on Tuesday and Wednesday, in addition to the matinees, so David ate a quick meal in the dining tent with Bernie and Grace and Sam. As they were finishing up, Russ Minor came looking for David. "Are you up to another clown parade, Father?"

"Not me! My clowning days are behind me."

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The parade went on without him, and he was watching from the sidelines with Ronnie Perkins as the business manager calculated the box-office receipts. "Best crowd we've had so far. You get more adults at night, paying adult prices."

Flint had driven the cannon truck in the parade, as he always did, and parked it in its usual position at the far end of the tent, as if to remind everyone of the forthcoming circus highlight. But toward the end of the show, not twenty minutes before the big event, Grace came running to find David.

"Bernie slipped and fell! I can't get him up. Can you give me a hand?"

He found Flint wedged between their trailer and the wooden steps to the door. "How'd you get yourself in this fix?" David asked, trying to lift the fallen man under his shoulders.

"Slipped on the steps," Flint muttered. "Damned fool thing. Be careful! I may have broken something."

With Grace's help, David managed to extract her husband from his awkward position. "I don't think anything's broken," he said, feeling Flint's leg with gentle fingers. "Can you stand up?"

He tried, but the leg immediately buckled beneath him. "I guess not. The trouble seems to be my right knee."

"I'll get some ice for it," Grace said quickly. "It may be a sprain."

He sat in the trailer doorway while she applied ice for ten minutes. There seemed to be no swelling, but he was still unable to put weight on the leg without pain. "I don't think I can perform tonight," he decided.

Grace surprised David by saying at once, "I'll go on in your place."

"No!"

"Why not? You told me yourself that the first human cannonball was a young woman named Zazel at the Royal Aquarium in Westminster in eighteen seventy-seven. If she could do it, so can I. You've told me what I need to know about proper landing techniques."

"It's too dangerous, Grace. We'll get Sam."

"I look better than Sam. I'll wear my tights."

"You gave birth just a month ago," he reminded her.

They were still in the trailer doorway arguing about it when Sam Tildon hurried up. "What's the trouble? You're supposed to be on, Bernie."

"I fell and hurt my knee. Grace wants to go on for me."

"No, you can't," Tildon insisted. "It's my job."

David interrupted the argument. "If Sam has practiced the cannonball he might be better at it than you, Grace."

"I want to do it," she insisted, retreating into the trailer to change her costume.

Tildon took a deep breath. "Keep her here, Father, if you have to tie her down. I'm going on."

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Minor and the other clowns were grouped around the cannon as they had been during the earlier performances. When the ringmaster introduced Sam Tildon, the human cannonball, the usual cheer went up. Most of the audience was not even aware that he was a substitute. He bowed and climbed the ladder to the cannon's mouth. Then he paused, glancing around until he spotted David and Grace by the entrance. He waved and blew her a kiss as he lowered himself inside. Then Minor went through his usual routine before pressing the firing button.

As Sam's body was catapulted into the air through the flash and noise of the fireworks, David realized at once that something was wrong. He wasn't traveling as fast as Bernie had been. He tried to twist around in mid flight but his body hit the sawdust a few feet short of the net. The audience was stunned into silence for an instant, even as the other performers rushed forward. David reached them and forced his way through to where Russ Minor was holding Tildon in his arms. "Father, I think he's—"

"He landed bad," the ringmaster said. "He didn't go far enough."

David quickly administered the last rites. It was all that he or anyone could do. Then he went to comfort Grace, who stood sobbing at the edge of the crowd. The ringmaster announced that there had been an accident and the evening's performance was at an end, but no one budged in the stands.

"What happened, Father?" Grace asked.

"I don't know. He's gone, Grace. I think he broke his neck when he landed."

Bernie must have realized that something had happened, hearing only the stunned silence of the crowd. He'd hobbled in from the trailer, supporting himself on Jeanne Gaffney's arm. "Is he all right?" he asked David, but he must have seen the answer in their grim faces.

It was Ronnie Perkins who pulled David aside a few moments later and led him to the back of the cannon. "I want to show you something, Father. This is the air-pressure gauge for the catapult. It's always set between one hundred fifty and two hundred pounds per square inch. The dial's been lowered below one fifty."

"What does that mean?"

"I think it's been tampered with deliberately so he'd land short of the safety net. I think this is murder."

Later, after the arrival of the police and ambulance, David met with Perkins in his office trailer. The manager decided it was too soon to relay his suspicions to the local police and risk disruption of their travel schedule. "Hell, maybe I'm wrong! I've got over two hundred people working here and they're my responsibility. If the

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local cops get nosing around, the first thing they'll do is keep us from leaving town."

David couldn't disagree with that. "Let me look into it, at least till tomorrow. I might be able to uncover something."

"Like a confession, Father?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't tell you if I did hear one. But if this was murder, I doubt if the killer's in any mood to confess."

"How do you mean?"

"Unless the clown changed the pressure setting at the last minute, it must have been done earlier. But Bernie didn't injure his leg until just before he was due to perform. If the setting was changed earlier, Bernie was the intended victim, not Sam."

"I'd better get Russ Minor in here," Perkins decided. "He would have noticed anything funny with the controls."

Minor was giving a statement to the police and when he was finished he joined them in the trailer. "Sure, I pressed the button on the cannon," he admitted. "I do it at all the performances."

"What about the pressure gauge?" the manager asked. "Didn't you notice it was set too low?"

Minor was still wearing his clown makeup, and the contrast with his frightened expression was stark. "I didn't touch any gauge, if that's what you're thinking. Hell, Sam was my good friend!"

"But what about Bernie Flint? There were times when he rubbed you the wrong way."

"Sure, but— You think someone was trying to kill him and got Sam by mistake?"

David didn't answer that, but suggested, "Suppose you tell me just how this pressure gauge on the cannon works."

"Well, the few I've seen have all been different. They don't mass-produce circus cannons for human cannonballs. It's a pretty specialized occupation. This one has a pressure gauge with a dial setting. Then there's a lever to cock it and a big red button to fire it. None of us ever touched the dial. Only Bernie and Sam were allowed to touch it. Sometimes Grace used to come out and fire the cannon when Bernie was inside, but lately they decided the clowns could do some business around the cannon and then I'd press the button as if it was an accident. The audience seemed to go for that."

Following the meeting with Perkins and the clown, David made his way to Bernie and Grace's trailer. Grace had followed the ambulance with Sam Tildon's body because there was no doctor along to pronounce him dead. Somehow, she explained, she was clinging to the hope they might revive him at the hospital. But it was not to be. The first doctor to see him covered his face.

"I feel terrible about this," Bernie said, trying to comfort her.

She lifted her head to him. "Why should you feel terrible? It could have been you. Perhaps it was meant to be you. Someone

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had changed the air-pressure dial." She turned to David. "Did you know that, Father?"

"Perkins told me."

She shook her head as if attempting to clear it. "I don't know what to think."

"It might have been an unfortunate accident," David suggested.

She shook her head. "I don't believe in accidents."

David slept poorly that night, and he was up before the clowns. He strode around the tents in the dawn light, stopping at the animal tent where the big cats were already awake. He went to the tiger cage, staring into the golden eyes of one of the beasts, remembering Blake's poem. " 'Did he who made the lamb make thee?' " he asked softly. Perhaps it was a question thinking men had always asked. Could good and evil have come from the same God? Could good and evil exist in the same person?

After breakfast he went to see Bernie Flint. He was still in his trailer and Grace had brought him some breakfast. "His knee still hurts," she told David. "He can't put any weight on it."

"We're going to take him to the hospital for an X-ray," David said.

Bernie heard that and immediately objected. "It'll be all right in a few days. I'm not going to any hospital."

David sat down next to him. "Yes, you are, and I'll tell you why. It appears that someone lowered the air-pressure setting on the cannon to kill or seriously injure you. But there is one other possibility—that Sam was the intended victim all along."

"How could that be?" Grace wanted to know. "No one could have known he'd go on because no one knew Bernie would injure his leg."

David's voice was almost sad as he replied. "But what if Bernie's leg wasn't really injured? What if it was a pretense to force Sam Tildon to take his place?"

"You think I killed him?" Bernie asked.

"I think we have to find out. That's why we're going to the hospital."

"That's crazy," Grace insisted. "Why would Bernie want to harm Sam?"

"I think you both know the answer to that. Now give me a hand with him, Grace. We have to get to the bottom of this, one way or another."

They drove to the Helena hospital in near silence, with Bernie not saying a word. Grace spoke only once, to ask, "Why are you doing this, Father?"

"Because we have to find out. Even if you don't want the answer now, you will in the months or years to come. I'm not trying to prove Bernie guilty. I'm trying to exonerate him."

The X-rays were taken and they waited patiently for the doctor's

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verdict. Looking grim, Bernie turned to Grace at one point. "Do you have a cigarette?"

"There's no smoking in hospitals, Bernie."

He grunted and fell silent again.

Presently the young resident came out holding a sheet of X-ray film. "You've got a hairline fracture," he announced, probably puzzled at the obvious relief on Grace's face. "That's why you can't put any weight on it. I don't think you'll need surgery but I want to put it in a cast to help the healing."

Bernie moistened his lips. "Does that mean I can't work tonight?"

"What sort of work do you do?" the doctor asked.

"I'm a human cannonball," he answered and the doctor laughed. They all laughed, even Bernie.

That night, after a brief argument, Bernie consented to let Grace go on in his place. She dressed in her spangled trapeze costume and tried a test shot during the dinner hour. She landed perfectly in the net and her only complaint was that the flash from the fireworks singed her legs. "This isn't a job for bare legs," she decided. "I'll have to cover them."

No one wanted that, least of all Ronnie Perkins. "Can't we tone down the fireworks?"

Bernie nodded. "We'll just use the noise and smoke, forget the flash." Then he turned to David. "Father, I want you personally to check that air-pressure gauge before she does her act. Make sure no one's tampered with it again."

"Don't worry," David assured him.

When the ringmaster announced a special treat for that night's show, the audience hushed. "Tonight, under this big top for the first time ever, we present Amazing Grace, the world's only female human cannonball!"

David was standing by Jeanne Gaffney and he asked if that was true. She shrugged. "Far as we know right now. The circus is a promotional business, Father. We don't worry too much about truth in advertising."

Even though he had checked the gauge himself and knew she was in no danger, David still held his breath when Amazing Grace slid into the cannon barrel and the clowns went into their act, culminating with Russ Minor pressing the big red button. Grace Smart flew out of the smoke and straight into the net, as if she'd been doing it all her life. The crowd went wild.

After the performance, when the circus family was still celebrating Grace's triumph, David said to Bernie and Grace, "I'd like to go back to your trailer after this is over. I'm leaving in the morning and it's time I told you who killed Sam Tildon."

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Grace opened a bottle of wine and the three of them sat around the little table in the trailer's kitchen. "Now what is it?" she asked. Her face had gone pale since his words back in the tent. "I thought you were satisfied Bernie didn't do it."

"He didn't. The X-ray proved it was a real injury, and not the sort to be self-inflicted. Yet where does that leave us? If no one could have known Sam would be the cannonball last night, he couldn't have been the intended target. Bernie was meant to be the victim."

"I always thought so," Bernie said grimly, taking a sip of wine. "Did Russ tamper with the gauge before he pressed the button?"

"Of course I thought of that, but there were other clowns all around. He couldn't have done it unnoticed. The cannon worked perfectly during the afternoon show, yet someone must have changed the gauge during the dinner hour. I saw for myself that there were always performers in the tent rehearsing their routines. Everyone knew that only you and Sam were allowed to work on the cannon, check the air-pressure gauge, load the fireworks and such. Anyone else fussing with the cannon would have been noticed. Only you or Sam could have done it without attracting attention."

Grace couldn't understand. "But you've already cleared Bernie, and Sam was the victim. There's no explanation for it."

"There is one," David told them. "Sadly, it's the only possible explanation. Sam Tildon must have tampered with the gauge himself. It was Sam Tildon who tried to kill you, Bernie."

The human cannonball shook his head. "That's crazy. If he knew the pressure gauge was set too low, why would he have gone into the cannon?"

David closed his eyes, then opened them and turned to Grace. "I suppose you could say he did it for love. He died because he loved you so much, Grace."

"No!" she objected, shaking her head, refusing to accept his words. "No, no, no—"

"He told me himself that he loved you, and even Bernie had seen the signs of it. I saw Sam myself between shows, checking the cannon. It was the only possible time the gauge could have been changed. He did it because his love for you had become an obsession, Grace. But then, during the performance, something completely unexpected happened. You fell on the step, Bernie, and cracked the bone in your leg. Grace immediately said she would take your place. It put Sam Tildon in an impossible position. He had planned a murder to gain the woman he loved, and now she was walking into the very trap he'd set for her husband. The only way he could save her was by going to the cannon himself, instantly. He couldn't change the air-pressure setting or his plot would be revealed. If he begged off going for any reason, Grace would be killed or seriously injured."

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Bernie was staring at his hands. "You have no proof of this."

"No, no proof certainly for a court of law. But Sam is beyond that now, isn't he? Remember, though, how he paused at the top of the cannon, waved, and blew a kiss. It was obviously intended for Grace, who was standing with me. It was meant to be a goodbye kiss. Knowing the air pressure would be too low to carry him to the net, he still tried to land with a minimum of damage to his body. You'll remember as he left the cannon he twisted in midair. But it was not enough to save him."

Grace was sobbing quietly then, and Bernie's hand came over to comfort her. "Must I hate him for what he tried to do?" he asked.

David shook his head. "He had both good and bad in him, like all God's creatures. In his final moments he showed us the good side, giving his life to save another."

In the morning David said his goodbyes and flew back home. He called Father Mallory from the rectory and was pleased to learn that his mother was doing fine after her surgery.

"How did it go out in Montana, Dave?"

"I'll tell you about it sometime. But like you said, it was just one more circus." ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

A	S	S	A	D	■	A	N	C	E	■	T	E	S	T
D	E	L	L	A	■	R	O	O	M	■	O	C	H	O
A	N	A	I	S	■	E	R	N	E	■	A	L	E	E
M	A	T	T	H	E	W	S	C	U	D	D	E	R	■
S	T	E	■	■	P	E	E	L	■	C	Y	C	L	E
■	E	S	S	E	S	■	■	A	S	I	■	T	O	G
■	■	■	A	R	T	■	E	V	A	■	R	I	C	O
■	L	A	W	R	E	N	C	E	B	L	O	C	K	■
C	A	R	S	■	I	O	U	■	B	A	S	■	■	■
A	G	R	■	U	N	I	■	■	A	B	Y	S	M	■
T	R	E	S	S	■	S	E	A	T	■	■	T	E	A
■	A	S	T	A	B	I	N	T	H	E	D	A	R	K
A	N	T	E	■	R	E	N	T	■	D	A	N	C	E
I	D	E	A	■	A	S	E	A	■	E	L	D	E	R
D	E	R	M	■	S	T	A	R	■	N	E	A	R	S

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Going Through a Phase

by Robert Barnard

"Where did I go wrong?" wailed Cynthia Corey to her friend and nominal boss Mary Haycroft, during a quiet spell in the afternoon at the flower shop.

"I'm sure you didn't go wrong at all," said Mary in her common-sense voice. "It's just a phase she's going through."

Cynthia could read her friend's face: The first sentence was totally sincere, but the second was a placebo she had no faith in. Mary had not seen much of Deborah these last few months, but she had seen enough.

Deborah had been such a gorgeous, heartwarming child. The split with Charles—Charles walking out on her to go and live with his new woman, to put the matter more precisely—never seemed to affect her as it had for a time her elder brother: Many of her five-year-old classmates at school were in a similar situation, and she loved going to stay with her father and Tina. The settlement and maintenance agreed by their lawyers had been generous, so Cynthia's part-time job in the flower shop had been no more than icing on the cake. Neither Cynthia nor the children wanted for anything. Deborah had been to an excellent private school, had had riding lessons, been to ballet classes, had all the "in" clothes bought for her when they came in, and replaced when they went out.

In an article for *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*, *EQMM* reviewer Jon L. Breen observed that Robert Barnard's recent work has "increasingly concerned family relationships and, directly or indirectly, the growing up experiences of children and adolescents"—a subject Mr. Barnard takes up again in his new story for us. The tale has many ironies, but of a darker sort than is typical of the Yorkshire author. ☨

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But it was the memory of Deborah's earliest years that really ripped Cynthia apart: her joy at her first sight of the sea, her endless games with Jingle when he was a puppy, perhaps above all the picture of her face when she had just demolished a slice of her mother's special chocolate cream gâteau—the little rosebud face, smeared all over brown, looking up at her with angelic satisfaction and saying: "I enjoyed that, Mummy."

Nowadays she'd be happy to get any sort of look that wasn't instinct with scorn or loathing.

"If only you could get her away from that Jed," Mary said.

"Jed!" Cynthia spat out. "What sort of name is that? What's the betting he was christened Thomas or Matthew or Timothy? If he was christened at all."

Except that Jed never gave the impression of coming from the sort of world where babies were christened Thomas or Timothy. He did not seem to come from any sort of world that Cynthia could acknowledge as related to her own. Deborah was recognisably a refugee from a sane world of jobs and houses with garages and sit-down meals—she was an outsider taking on new rules and styles even as she rejected her old ones. Jed was a native of her new country: ensconced, at home, the genuine product. And quite uniquely horrible.

She remembered Jed's first eruption into her life. It was last summer, when Deborah was only fifteen. Cynthia had begun to worry about her absences from home, her rudeness, her use of makeup (makeup! how long ago it seemed when makeup was all she had to worry about!). Then one Saturday afternoon, as she was cooking in the kitchen, a motorcycle had come to a squealing halt outside the gate, and two black-geared figures had got off. As the pillion passenger approached down the drive, removing its helmet, she realized with horror that it was Deborah. When the pair banged through the kitchen door she had swallowed, suppressed her rage, and said:

"Aren't you going to introduce me, Debbie?"

Jed had looked at her, ignored her outstretched hand, then turned to Deborah.

"Isn't there anyfink to eat in this dump?"

"I'm making a chocolate gâteau. It's Debbie's fav—"

"Got any 'amburgers in the freezer? Okay—wiv plenty of onions an' termater sauce."

It was an order to Cynthia. Deborah sat on the kitchen table and looked at her. Cynthia just said brightly: "I'll leave you to cater to your friend's wants," and went through to the lounge. Later she washed up the charred frying pan with bits of burnt onion in it. She'd never set her mind to teaching Deborah to cook. Perhaps that's how he likes them, she thought.

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Later, when she'd heard his name all too often from Deborah, she had got down a dictionary of first names from the bookshelves, bought when Nicholas, her son, was born, and only pored over once since then, when a name was needed for Deborah. "Jed," it said: "Pet form of Jedidiah." And under "Jedidiah" it said, "Hebrew: 'friend (beloved) of the Lord.'"

The Lord has a funny taste in friends, thought Cynthia.

Since then, her encounters with Jed had been infrequent but memorable. The most recent had been a fortnight before. She had been upstairs, and had heard the back door being thrown open. Everything the pair did was a demonstration. She had been changing her clothes at the time, and by the time she was ready to go downstairs the dreadful pair had been ensconced in the lounge: Jed's black boots were on the coffee table and his dirty leather gear was soiling the easy chair he sat in. Pop music was blaring from the television set. He began flicking the zapper, an expression of incredulity on his podgy face.

"On'y five ——ing channels. You'd fink you wez in the ——ing nineteenth century in this ——ing 'ouse."

His vocabulary embraced words that Cynthia had only heard on late-night television, when flicking through channels. Mostly, however, he confined himself to the one obscenity. It was one that made Cynthia wish he'd soften it to "bloody." Her heart was in her mouth, but she was determined not to show fear. She crossed the room, seized the remote control from him, and cancelled out the din. With a crunch of boots on wood Jed raised himself in his chair, grabbed the zapper back with unnecessary violence, then turned the television back on.

"Tell this old slag to get me somefink to eat. And tell her to give you some ——ing cookery lessons, 'coz at the moment you're ——ing 'opeless."

Cynthia had turned, left the room, and then left the house. Though she was not due at the flower shop for another hour, she had gone straight there and poured out her heart to Mary Haycroft in the intervals of customers coming in and out. Then she had spent half an hour in an increasingly desperate phone call to the police. They were much too canny and overstretched in resources to get caught up in a "domestic." In fact, they clearly resented being treated as social workers. They advised her to get the family involved, if talking the situation over with her daughter had failed ("It never even began," wailed Cynthia). Surely the girl's father could help? Or was she close to her brother? If not, was there another relative she could be sent away to for a time? "You mean I should inflict *that* on my mother?" asked Cynthia satirically. In the end, the policeman had an urgent call on another line, refused Cynthia's request to find out if Jed had a

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criminal record, and rang off.

That was the most recent of Cynthia's few encounters with Jed. Mostly she had just watched as Jed's influence on Deborah became more and more complete. There had been the facial studs and ring which disfigured the rosebud face and both disgusted and somehow frightened her: that *her daughter* could mutilate herself in this way! Then there was the crazy dyed and lacquered hair, the filthy cheap clothing that was somehow a uniform, the sinister smell that Cynthia was sure betokened drug-taking.

On her sixteenth birthday Deborah announced that she would no longer be attending school, and that there was nothing her mother could do about it. When Cynthia rang the Queen Elfrida School the headmistress confirmed that there was nothing she could do. She seemed to be having difficulty keeping the joy and relief out of her voice at the news.

Not long after this she caught a glimpse of Debbie in the bathroom preparing to have a shower: There was a livid bruise on her shoulder. A week after Cynthia's phone call to the police she had injuries that she could not conceal: Her left eye was purple and her cheek disfigured by a livid bruise.

"We got into a fight with some other bikers in Aylesbury," she said, shrugging. "It's nothing."

Cynthia's blood froze. She foresaw a horrible end for her daughter in a gang bust-up of bikers. On reflection, later, she decided she didn't believe in the fight. She put the bruises down to Jed.

The only thing she could think of to do was to follow the advice of the policeman she had talked to: Call in the family. She ruled out her mother entirely—too old, too out-of-touch, too easily distressed. That left Charles and Debbie's brother Nicholas. The latter, after early upsets and problems at the time of the divorce, had become ultra-conventional, and was now something in the City that Cynthia did not understand, though it seemed to bring in unimaginable sums of money.

"If Deborah thinks she's an adult at sixteen," he pronounced, in a voice already scented with pomposity, "what you should do is treat her as one."

"What do you mean, exactly?" asked Cynthia.

"Tell her she only lives in your house on your terms. Tell her what your rules are, and that the moment she breaks them you will have the locks changed—or, better still, get bolts. Say she has to be in by half-past ten, or she's locked out for the night. If she's not in school and hasn't got a job, she should take her share in the housework. And the cooking."

"Oh, not the cooking!"

"You'd be suffering in a good cause. She's treating your house like a low-class hotel. Show her it can't go on."

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"She'd never accept it. It would be the equivalent of throwing her out of her own house."

"Well, if that's what it takes. It's your house, not hers, and she might as well be in a doss house. Throwing her out could be the means of bringing her to her senses."

That remark did put the suggestion in a more positive light, and Cynthia did think over the proposal for several days. In the end, she had to face the fact that she would be condemning her own daughter to a life on the streets, one of those pathetic creatures who held out their hands to passersby. She couldn't do it.

That left Charles. She was very reluctant to ring him, because it would be obvious at once that what they were talking about was failure: her failure with her daughter. Oddly enough, though, the moment she heard his voice she felt comforted. And as they talked she found she liked his suggestion.

"I tell you what, I'll ring her up and invite her over. It's months since she came to see us, and she's always enjoyed coming. I can't give you advice sight unseen. Of course, heaven knows if I'll have any to give once I *have* seen the problem. I expect Mary is right: It's a phase that will pass."

His tone was different after Deborah had visited him. Cynthia was surprised that she went at all, but came to the conclusion she was playing off one parent against the other. Charles rang her the next day at the shop, for safety's sake. His tone was aghast.

"My God—it was like meeting a horrible stranger. It was the visit from hell. She told Tina to f— off, get stuffed—you name it, she said it. Tina sends her sympathy, by the way."

"Thank Tina from me," said Cynthia coolly. "The question is, what are we to do?"

Charles was silent for a moment, perhaps nonplussed by that "we."

"I think you're right that she's made herself over to him. I could see and hear all the time she has some other being—*manifesting* itself through her."

"Jed."

"Yes, Jed. The answer seems to be: You've got to strike at Jed."

Cynthia was uncertain what he meant.

"Do you mean somehow discredit him in her eyes?"

"Is that possible?"

"No. Not at the moment."

"That wasn't what I meant, anyway. I thought of something more physical."

"I'm not a lady wrestler, Charles."

"No, but there are people for hire. People who would duff him up good and proper, if you'll pardon the cockney, and make it clear in the process why they're doing it, and that he's got to keep away."

Cynthia considered.

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"It would be using his own horrible methods against him."

"Exactly."

There was something ruthless about Charles that had not appealed to her before, but did now.

"I don't suppose they advertise in the Yellow Pages. . . ."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Why don't you ask Nicholas?"

"Nicholas? But he's so respectable!"

"Exactly. He works in a top bank. There'd have to be someone there who knows all about security. And he works with very rich men, people who pay to have themselves properly protected."

"But wouldn't we want . . . something a bit more . . . dodgy?"

"The rich men would know all about that, too. I bet Nick does himself already, though he might pretend he has to consult. 'Respectable' these days is different to what it was fifty years ago when we were young, Cynthia."

"Thirty years ago."

"Would you like me to give him a call?"

"Oh, *would* you?"

The next evening he called her back.

"Nicholas says try Spires Protection Services in Oxford. He says they'll do anything short of contract killings."

"Oh Charles, you know I wouldn't—"

"Short of, I said. You want a thorough job done, otherwise it won't be worth doing at all."

That was true. But Cynthia felt very troubled—of course she did. She had lived her life wholly within the law—had once been approached to become a magistrate. Now there had entered her life an element that was . . . well, her word "dodgy" didn't begin to cover it. This was something heinous.

It was also something she could not confide in Mary. That worried her very much, symbolising what she was sliding into. In the end, though, something was bound to spark a determination to act. In this case it was three nights in a row in which Deborah did not come home. After the third, with telltale signs of a fight on her daughter's face and shoulders, she told her that if it happened again she would get new locks and bolts fitted on the doors and would summon the police if they made any disturbance. Then she shut herself in what had once been Charles's study and rang Spires Protection Services, and accepted their suggestion of an appointment two days later.

The voice on the phone was quiet and smooth, the premises of the company, just off the High, almost ecclesiastical. The manager's office, into which she was shown, was as clean and anonymous as a bank manager's. It did not occur to her that if this was as respectable an organisation as its image tried to suggest, the manager would be advising her of alternative courses of action, warning

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her that removing one person would not necessarily stop her daughter mixing in the sort of circles she was obviously attracted to.

Instead, Mr. Purley nodded as she told him the problem, described Jed, gave vivid details of the transformation in her daughter's behaviour.

"It's as if she's been taken over," she concluded. He did not suggest that perhaps she had been a willing accomplice in the process.

"He needs to be . . . warned off, then . . . in a fairly . . . direct way," said the quiet, almost self-effacing man.

"That's what I had in mind," admitted Cynthia.

"And recently your daughter has been coming home at night?"

"The last two. I don't know how long it will last."

"Then speed is of the essence, as I'm sure you'd agree. What time would you expect him to bring her back?"

"Any time between half-past ten and two."

"And the neighbourhood?"

"Residential. Mostly elderly people, early to bed. And the school round the corner occupies most of the block, with a row of quite nice shops opposite. Quite busy in the daytime, but very quiet at night."

"Fairly promising, then. In any case, this young man is, by your evidence, the type likely to find himself in confrontational situations. We would need a van, to load his bike onto—just in case he is in no condition to ride off himself. Would he ride off before your daughter was safely in the house?"

"No—certainly not at the moment. He waits to see she's not been locked out."

"Ideal. We wouldn't want her to see what happens. Now—two men, a van, maybe a bike for the other chap, to simulate driving away for your daughter's benefit. . . . I think it could be done for fifteen hundred."

The sum took Cynthia's breath away, but after a second she nodded. Mr. Purley suggested that same night, and he saw her out rather as if they had just arranged a small temporary overdraft.

When she got home, Debbie, of course, was out. The time of waiting was almost unbearable. Anticipation, a mixture of dread and excitement, fought in her mind with conscientious scruple: If it came to the point, how could she justify in court condoning—inciting, in fact—a criminal act? Everything that was happening was so out of her normal sphere. Twilight was about eight-thirty, and once it was dark Cynthia lurked restlessly around in the darkened upstairs of the house looking for signs of the men she had hired. She made a cup of tea, and when she went back upstairs she saw an unobtrusive white van parked on the side road, outside the school. Going to the front of the house, she saw a motorbike arrive, ridden by a looming black shape. Soon there were two such shapes—oblong and right-angled, hideously substantial, and sta-

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tioned under an overhanging laburnum tree four doors down on the other side of the road. Suddenly Cynthia's tea no longer seemed refreshing.

She had nearly an hour and a half's wait. The tension inside her screwed up to an almost unbearable tightness. Then, close to eleven-thirty, she heard a powerful motorbike in the distance. Overcome by some irresistible impulse she darted downstairs, into the kitchen, out of the back door, and round to the side. She heard farewells in the street, the click of the gate, then the front door banging with Deborah's usual obtrusive lack of consideration. She forgot that a forceful shutting of the front door often caused the back door to swing open if it was unlocked.

A motorbike started up. Surely he wasn't going to be allowed to get away. No—Mr. Purley had said . . . Yes, and there was Jed still on his bike, adjusting his helmet. As she watched, another bike loomed out of the darkness and drew up beside him. Then a second shape came from across the road. In a second, Jed's helmet was grabbed from him, he was hauled off his bike, and then onto the pavement, shouting and struggling. Cynthia, her heart beating fast with excitement, crept forward, keeping out of the pool of brightness dropped by the streetlight. She heard muffled cries, then, through the iron railings, saw the man on the ground being violently kicked, first on the legs and body, then in the unprotected head and face. Then she saw the larger of the two shapes pull him up, throw him backwards across his own bike, and shout in his bleeding ear.

"You never come back here again, do you understand? And you never have anything to do with that girl again. Got it?"

Cynthia thought there was a nod. Then they started again, banging his head against his bike, throwing him to the ground, and weighing in with their heavy boots.

Suddenly Cynthia was conscious of a shape beside her. Horrified, she saw it was Debbie.

"The back door was open," she said. "I wondered where you were."

For a moment she sounded like the old Debbie. Cynthia turned and looked at her. The rosebud face, or some dim remnant of it, was still there, but there was a sharp gleam in her eyes. The vicious kicking was still going on. For a moment, the larger shape straightened up, and in a pale shaft of street lighting Cynthia saw a square, brutal, sensuous-looking face looking at her daughter. Then he took one last kick, and the two men began to drag the unconscious body round to the van. They heard a bump as he was thrown in. Then the bigger man came back to fetch Jed's motorbike. Again he looked in Deborah's direction. This time a definite spark passed between their eyes, and the edges of his mouth turned up cruelly.

"I enjoyed that, Mummy," said Deborah. ●

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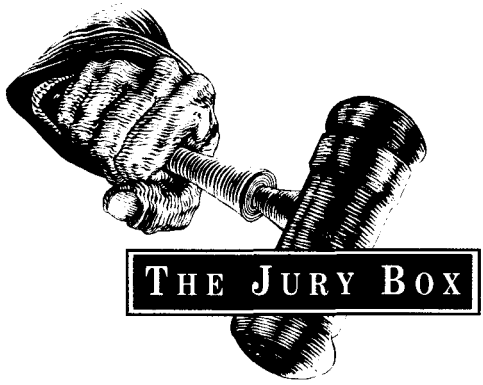

by Jon L. Breen

Sports backgrounds, once rare in mystery fiction, have become much more frequent in the past couple of decades. The favorite sport of mystery writers, from Conan Doyle to Edgar Wallace to Dick Francis, has long been horse racing. But one could compile a respectable criminous bibliography on boxing, golf, and baseball, too. The best boxing mystery I ever read was William Campbell Gault's *The Canvas Coffin* (1953). Writing as Will Duke, Gault also produced one of the best golf mysteries, *Fair Prey* (1956). Beginning with *A Wicked Slice* (1989), Charlotte and Aaron Elkins have contributed a series about female golf pro Lee Ofsted. Baseball has been explored by writers as varied as Cortland Fitzsimmons, Herbert Resnicow, and William L. DeAndrea in one-shots, and Crabbe Evers, Donald Honig, Alison Gordon, and Troy Soos in series. Below is the welcome return of one of the best baseball mystery writers, followed by new books from the ring and the green.

*** R.D. Rosen: *Dead Ball,* Walker, $23.95. Retired-ballplayer-turned-private-eye-turned-couch-potato Harvey Blissberg first appeared in the Edgar-winning *Strike Three You're Dead* (1984), one of the finest first novels of the eighties. In his fifth appearance and first in seven years, he's bodyguarding a black ballplayer on the American League's fictitious Providence team whose threat to Joe DiMaggio's consecutive-games hitting streak has awakened white racists. Apart from his ability to spin a good whodunit, Rosen's fine prose captures the magic baseball holds for its fans. As in the best sports mysteries, whether Moss Cooley will break the record carries as much interest as who is behind the threats.

*** Gary Phillips: *Shooter's Point,* Kensington, $22. The second appearance of Las Vegas courier Martha Chainey, combining frantic action with sharp

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dialogue and well-observed regional detail, concerns the in-the-ring shooting murder of a heavyweight championship combatant and the concurrent theft of several million dollars in cash from a casino owner. The boxing action, confined to the first part of the book, is well described and seems authentic to your non-fight-fan reviewer. I prefer Phillips's L.A. private eye Ivan Monk, but Martha has her attractions.

** William Bernhardt: *Final Round,* Ballantine, $23.95. A whodunit set at the Masters golf tournament sounds like a good idea, but Bernhardt's departure from his usual legal-thriller mode is a misfire. There's plenty of Masters lore, but the golf itself is disappointing; the narrative impetus is there, but the dialogue is by the numbers and the characterization overly broad. The reader is asked to believe that a tournament golfer and his veteran caddy would not notice immediately that his favorite driver has been replaced by a ringer. The biggest problem: Even in the context of comic exaggeration and slapstick, golfer/sleuth Conner Cross is too big a jerk to elicit reader sympathy.

** John R. Corrigan: *Cut Shot,* Sleeping Bear, $23.95. First-time novelist Corrigan doesn't have Bernhardt's professional sheen, but at least his golf is better. In the course of encounters with some standard-issue gangsters and their gambling scam, touring pro Jack Austin actually lets us know what score he shot on occasion. Austin, who like Harvey Blissberg has a rocky love relationship with a female TV sportscaster, is a promising character, and I expect better books down the line from his creator.

*** Val McDermid: *Killing the Shadows,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. It had to happen: a novel about a serial killer of authors of serial-killer novels. The result isn't nearly as gimmicky as it sounds. Psychology professor and profiler Fiona Cameron and her novelist husband Kit Martin head a large cast of well-drawn characters in a novel that juggles three separate serial-killer investigations; settings in England, Scotland, and Spain; writing samples from four fictitious authors; and well-calibrated suspense set pieces. What looks early in the novel like a broad fair-play clue (for the reader but not known to the police) proves a dud.

*** Ian Rankin: *The Falls,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. In the latest from another Scottish novelist of growing stature, maverick cop John Rebus and colleagues are looking for a missing young woman from a wealthy banking family. She may be the victim of a serial killer who leaves dolls and miniature caskets to commemorate his victims. Also involved are an anonymous online games player known as Quizmaster and Edinburgh history going back to those over-zealous resurrection men, Burke

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and Hare. Like all the best procedural writers, Rankin manages to involve many continuing characters while sticking to the case at hand.

The second volume of Lawrence Block's anthology *Opening Shots* (Cumberland, $17.95) asks 23 more writers (including Harlan Ellison, Joe Gores, Edward D. Hoch, Evan Hunter, H.R.F. Keating, Dick Lochte, John Lutz, Sharyn McCrumb, Joyce Carol Oates, Bill Pronzini, and Peter Straub) to introduce their first crime short stories, which may be first written, first bought, or first published. As before, the story notes are fascinating, particularly those of Ed Gorman and Stuart Kaminsky. Block's own contribution is his first *EQMM* story, and many of the writers make reference to founding editor EQ and his successors.

More than any novelist, actor-director Jack Webb popularized the police procedural form in the United States with his TV and radio series *Dragnet*, a program with a history (1949-1970) rich in extreme highs and lows. For the full story of the show and its creator, impeccably researched and exceedingly well told, read Michael J. Hayde's *My Name's Friday: The Unauthorized but True Story of* Dragnet *and the Films of Jack Webb* (Cumberland, $18.95).

In the 24th issue of the splendid British journal *Crime Time* (Trafalgar Square, $8.95), several writers provocatively compare American and British crime fiction. The 256 pages include reviews and articles on movie and TV crime; book reviews; discussions of writers as varied as Charles Willeford, Richard Hallas (Eric Knight), Gerald Kersh, Desmond Bagley, and James Hadley Chase; and interviews with Donna Leon, Walter Mosely, Robert Crais, and Donald E. Westlake. Though there are appreciations of Michael Innes and Henry Cecil, the bias is in favor of the hardboiled and noirish from both sides of the Atlantic. Eddie Duggan, after denigrating the British Golden Age and elevating the American hardboiled, notes that "the form . . . continues to develop and explore a range of issues." For the Americans he most admires, "these tend to relate to post-war American masculinity, whether cast from the obsessions of the tortured psyche of the child of a murder victim, now grown to adulthood, or the cultural interstices of ethnicity, gender, and class straddled by a third-generation immigrant." Isn't that why you read mystery fiction? (Me neither!)

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Art by Mark Evans

GREED

by Loren D. Estleman

Max Fink's very public dream of 1927 turned into a hangover in 1929, but by then everyone else was too busy taking aspirins to notice.

Fink had lucked into millions in 1912, when he rented out his candy store in Brooklyn evenings and weekends for the exhibition of silent motion-picture shorts. When he came by one night after closing and saw how many people had lined up to pay to see painted Indians chasing a train across the New Jersey countryside, he evicted his tenants, bought a projector, struck a deal with a local distributor, and went into show business.

The movie colony migrated to southern California. Fink followed, pausing at choice locations across the continent to purchase vaudeville theaters in trouble and convert them into movie houses. Fifteen years after he stopped selling candy, he invested his profits in the stock market and used his credit to build a chain of motion-picture palaces from coast to coast, saving the jewel in the crown for Los Angeles.

The Oracle was designed as a Balinese-Turkish-Grecian temple,

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with a slight Polynesian influence. Seating was planned for 5000, with space in the pit for a 100-piece orchestra. Fink commissioned a four-manual Wurlitzer pipe organ, a half-ton crystal chandelier, and plaster Pegasuses to flank the grand staircase leading to the mezzanine. When word reached H. L. Mencken, he said it showed what God could do if He had bad taste.

Then *The Jazz Singer* opened to delirious throngs at Grauman's, and overnight Hollywood shut down all its silent productions, built sound stages, and wired its sets so audiences could hear their favorite matinee idols speaking lines instead of having to read them on title cards. All this retooling sparked a recession in California. Reluctantly, Fink told his contractor to reduce the size of the orchestra pit and reconfigure the auditorium to seat only 1,800. Construction in six cities was postponed until the industry caught its second wind.

"There's a skeleton, a crumbling Art Deco movie palace, and Erich von Stroheim's ghost, decked out in full Austrian kit, complete with monocle and riding crop," author Loren Estleman said in a letter to us introducing this, his latest Valentino murder mystery. One day, Mr. Estleman says, there will be a series of novels featuring Valentino. In the meantime, the stories are getting longer and more complex—and better all the time!

In spite of the cutbacks, the completed Oracle was a wonder. Its marquee towered forty feet into the sky, lit by 16,000 electric bulbs, with colored searchbeams swiveling and crossing far above the rooftops. The attendance at the premiere of *The Hollywood Review of 1929* shattered every record set since *Ben Hur* in 1926. But six months later, Max Fink was broke.

After Wall Street crashed in '29, Fink was forced to sell his theater chain to avoid bankruptcy. It was a temporary reprieve. In 1933 he shot himself to death in a dollar-a-week hotel room within sight of a line waiting to get in to see Mae West in a personal appearance at the Oracle. Nearly seventy years later, it was rumored Max Fink's ghost still roamed the aisles of his beloved picture palace.

If so, the dust and mold spores must have kept him too busy sneezing to rattle his chains.

This time, when Valentino stepped onto the sidewalk before the theater, there were no crowds, no colored lights, no bulky cops in double-breasted tunics to hold back hysterical women. Partly it was because this Valentino was not the star of *The Sheik;* mostly it was because the Oracle was a wreck. Time and competing forms of entertainment had not been kind to the place. The fabulous marquee was long gone, the Deco fluting and baroque flourishes

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that had decorated the building's facade chipped and pigeon-stained and blackened with soot. Plywood covered the box-office windows and a palimpsest of spray-painted gang signs coated the sandstone to a height of eight feet all around. When he entered the lobby, Valentino left footprints an inch deep in the dust on the linoleum that covered the marble floor. Nothing remained of the friezes and statuary. Insulation hung like entrails from a ceiling ten feet lower than the original.

"It's what you'd call a fixer-upper," said the real-estate agent, Anita Somebody. She was a carefully preserved blonde in her forties, and Valentino knew her story without asking: She'd come out from Des Moines or someplace like that twenty years ago, hoping for a shot at *Dallas,* and when that missed the mark and she couldn't get work in commercials, it was either realty or prostitution. Prostitution didn't come with a health plan. She looked obscenely well pressed in her agency blazer and tailored skirt among the rat droppings.

"I barely know one end of a hammer from the other," Valentino said. "Why are you showing me this place again? I'm looking for a place to live."

"It's the closest we can come to your budget, unless you want to commute from Oxnard. The neighborhood's zoned commercial and residential. No one's sure where the break is. You could put in twenty years before they figure it out."

"I can't afford it. I don't mean the purchase price. If I bought this place, I'd feel obligated to restore it to its original grandeur. Did I mention I'm on salary at UCLA?"

Her lipstick smile told him she hadn't capped her teeth. "Why don't you postpone your decision until you've seen the projection booth?"

But he was in trouble long before he got there. The path led through the auditorium, crushed red velvet seats and gilt sconces, strung with cobwebs but no less charming for the neglect than Egyptian treasures half-buried in Sahara sand. He felt the same tingle he'd felt when his mother took his hand and led him into a movie theater for the first time. But that had been only a square blockhouse in Fox Forage, Indiana. This was Max Fink's fabled Oracle, home of *Hell's Angels, 42nd Street,* and *Anna Christie.* He could almost hear Garbo's smoky voice, saying—

"There's a hidden staircase here."

"What?" He had to put on the brakes to keep from colliding with Anita the realtor. She'd stopped to pry with her fingers at a seam in the drywall. A six-foot-tall rectangular section came away, revolving on parched hinges. Dusty light lay on a flight of steep narrow steps leading upward.

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"They seem to have gone to a lot of trouble to keep the customers from finding the projection booth," she said.

"Illusion."

"I beg your pardon?"

"They called Hollywood the Dream Factory," Valentino said. "A dream won't work if you know where it's coming from. They cared about that kind of thing back then."

"Before my time, I guess. I just like to pop a tape into the VCR and veg out on the sofa in my sweats."

He smiled. "Bet you liked *There's Something About Mary.*"

"Oh, yes. It was hilarious! Now, follow me carefully. I'm sure these steps aren't up to code."

In the stairwell he thought he smelled stale popcorn and Moxie. It was probably dry rot, or else phantom Fink having a snack. Valentino had to turn sideways to avoid rubbing the walls with his shoulders.

The booth was actually a spacious loft, with a square opening overlooking the screen, or what remained of it behind a burlap-colored fire curtain. He remembered the Oracle had been one of the last L.A. theaters to show 3-D films back in the fifties. That required twin Bell & Howell projectors, each the size of a VW Beetle. They'd have needed plenty of room, but not this much. He could have put all the furniture in his present quarters into this space.

Anita sensed his curiosity. "There used to be a wall there. On the other side was a sort of lumber room where they stored posters and props. They had live shows onstage during the Depression, to entice people who wouldn't ordinarily spend the money on a ticket. In the sixties this was a hippie commune." She was chanting like a tour guide. "There's a bathroom through that door, which the projectionist used. It's a comfortable bachelor arrangement."

"What's behind *that* door?" He pointed. This one had curved corners, set into a gasketlike frame. It had a broom handle.

"Believe it or not, it's a vault. We're supposed to keep it locked so kids can't get in and suffocate. That's where they kept the films. There's nothing in there now, just empty cans."

He asked to look. She produced a ring of keys and undid the deadbolt. The enclosure was four feet wide and six feet deep. Anita held the door while he stepped inside. He was glad he hadn't said what he thought of *There's Something About Mary.*

The air was stale but dry and cool. There was no light fixture. He peered through the dimness, groping at built-in racks holding jumbles of flat film cans that made a tinny empty sound when he moved them. A built-in bench allowed him to sit while he tugged at one of a row of cans standing on edge on the bottom rack. Something thumped inside. He rattled the next three or four in line. He was sure they contained reels of film.

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Many disappointments encountered in his years with UCLA's Film Preservation Department had taught him not to get excited. He'd probably stumbled on someone's long-forgotten pornographic library. He lifted a can off the rack and turned it toward the light outside, squinting at the yellowed label.

He returned the can to the rack—his hand didn't even shake—and stepped outside, dusting off his palms. "If I buy this place, everything comes with it, right?"

Anita frowned prettily. "You mean mineral rights? I'm—"

"No, I mean all the contents of the building."

"Of course. A sale is a sale."

Valentino smiled. "Where do I sign?"

"*Greed?* You ought to open a window in your screening room. You've been breathing acetate."

Kyle Broadhead pronounced Valentino intoxicated in the ringing tone he used in his classroom to declare Robert Eltman a hack. The Film Studies professor lay almost supine in his ergonomic office chair with his feet propped on the drawleaf of his desk, unscrewing and screwing back together the pieces of his favorite pipe, which he was no longer allowed to smoke on campus. With his eyelids at half-mast and his chin drawn into the loose flesh around his neck, he resembled a trimmed-down Alfred Hitchcock; a director he admired up to a point.

"I don't blame you for thinking that," Valentino said. "You've forgotten more about cinema history than I'll ever know."

"Flattering, but inaccurate. I've forgotten nothing."

Idle braggadocio, in anyone but the author of *The Persistence of Vision,* the bible of film preservation. The book chronicled Broadhead's thirty-year quest for the original 1912 version of *Quo Vadis?* produced in Italy; a quest interrupted by the three years he spent in a prison in Yugoslavia, accused of spying. He was Valentino's only mentor.

"I thought *I* was a buccaneer," Broadhead continued. "I never signed an agreement to buy a house on the evidence of a label on a film can I didn't open."

"I didn't want to open one under those conditions. You know how unstable that old nitrate stock is. For all I knew, the next person she showed the place to might have been with MCA or Turner. Or worse, some real-estate developer who wouldn't know Stroheim from Streisand and threw it all out. I had to jump."

Broadhead pursed his lips, Hitchcock fashion. "You've been daydreaming for years about buying one of these broken-down picture palaces and fixing it up. You just wanted an excuse."

"Partly. I didn't imagine seeing that label. And there were enough cans on the rack to suggest it's a complete print."

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Valentino let him ponder while he breathed in the cramped academic atmosphere. Books crowded the floor in careless stacks, an arrangement that contrasted sharply with the orderly shelves of videotapes, DVDs, and sixteen-millimeter prints in dustproof cases. He knew he was coming off faintly ridiculous, like a tourist waving a map he'd bought from a street hustler, thinking he possessed the key to the Lost Dutchman. Preservationists and silent-film buffs had been looking for Erich von Stroheim's directorial masterpiece since 1925, when his horrified superiors at MGM slashed its twenty-four reel, four-hour running time by more than half and, apparently, threw away the deleted footage. Valentino calculated that over time he'd wasted an amount equal to the department's annual budget chasing rumors of fragments and entire reels awaiting rescue from junk shops in Vienna, Alaskan landfills, and the cellars of eccentric private collectors.

"Everything's against it, including timing," Broadhead said. "The film was four years old when the Oracle opened. By then you couldn't give away tickets to a silent feature, so what was it doing in the vault? I think your realtor salted the mine. She probably did her homework on you after you made the appointment."

"That's diabolical, even for California."

"Von Stroheim chose the title *Greed* for a reason."

"Anyway, it can't hurt to check it out. I have to fly to San Francisco this afternoon to look at B trailers. Also I'm nervous about handling eighty-year-old stock. Can you take a look?"

The professor blew through his pipe. "Maybe it's time we laid this grail to rest. It's consumed too much money and far too many careers, starting with von Stroheim's."

"In other words, you don't want any part of it."

"Who said that? My God, man, it's *Greed.* Give me the keys."

In San Francisco, Valentino was working for the enemy. A retired RKO flack had died there of complications from a broken hip, leaving fifty thousand feet of promotional trailers from 1940s programmers to his daughter, and Viacom wanted an expert evaluation before buying them to dress up some re-releases on video. The company's pockets were so deep its board of directors didn't realize it had been in competition with UCLA for the world's dwindling supply of classic films for years. But in return for Valentino's advice, the megacorporation had promised to donate a percentage of the profits to the Film Preservation Department.

The department could use the cash, and after his impulsive action that morning, the archivist needed the job security. The mortgage on the Oracle would eat up everything he stood to gain from the sale of the house he'd outgrown in West Hollywood, and he was looking at a

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couple of hundred thousand dollars' worth of renovations that would take years to complete. What had he been thinking?

His elegant room at the Drake—courtesy of his temporary employers—helped him forget for a time his commitment to a steady diet of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, and the trailers, which were in pristine condition, allowed him to lose himself in the era of snap-brim hats and mink stoles. But the trolley-car trip back downtown after the screening only reminded him of the location shots for *Greed.* Von Stroheim, mad genius that he was, had insisted upon filming every line of Frank Norris's novel, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco,* tracing the descent of a good-natured, slow-witted dentist into insanity and murder, all for a cache of money his wife had hidden from him. Valentino had been appalled and fascinated by the butchered version he had seen, and was obsessed with the opportunity to experience the director's original vision.

The auteur's dream had been, like poor old Max Fink's, grandiose and doomed. He had started out with fifty reels—*eight hours* of flickering celluloid—and edited them down to a feature that was still eighty minutes longer than *The Birth of a Nation.* Von Stroheim had hoped that people would come to see the first two hours, adjourn for dinner, then come back for the rest. The idea was decades ahead of its time; too early for the studio brass. It was the beginning of the end for him as a director. Soon he was supporting himself as an actor, playing a succession of Prussians and Nazis for audiences to hiss at until his swan song, as the loyal butler and ex-husband of Gloria Swanson's Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard,* the role for which he was best remembered. Ironically, the character was a former great director reduced to menial servitude.

Valentino had room service on Viacom and ordered a movie on Pay-Per-View, but lost interest after twenty minutes: There were no drunken-brute dentists, no Death Valley confrontations, no ZaSu Pitts. He left a wake-up call for six o'clock—his plane was at eight—and went to bed.

"Herr Valentino, you haff had your rest, *ja?"*

He started awake, he thought. A swatch of moonlight lay on the carpet like a gauntlet flung through a gap in the curtains covering the window. A dark figure stood in the shadows to one side with feet spread thirty inches apart.

Valentino's heart bumped. He couldn't speak. Had he double-locked the door? He remembered putting on the chain.

"You vill safe *mein Kind, ja?* I am counting on you."

The intruder's Teutonic accent was as hard to follow as his German. Valentino had the wild thought that his room had been broken into by a neo-Nazi skinhead. "What do you want?" he asked hoarsely. "My wallet's on the bureau. Take it and go."

A bitter laugh escaped the shape in the shadows. "Vot do I vant

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vit your money? I spent more than you earn in a month on one dinner at the Trocadero. I vant *mein Kind.*"

The Trocadero hadn't existed for fifty years. *Mein Kind?* He tried to remember his high school German. *My child.* "I think you've mistaken me for someone else." That sounded weirdly comical, even to him.

"Du lieber Gott." The stranger stamped his feet twice, propelling himself sideways into the shaft of cold light.

Valentino's breath caught. The man was decked out head-to-toe in the uniform of an imperial Austrian officer. A visored cap perched at an arrogant angle above his shaved temples, his white tunic was buttoned tightly to his throat and sparkled with medals, and riding breeches were stuffed into the tops of gleaming black knee-length boots. In one hand he held a pair of gloves, in the other a leather riding crop, its thong handle resting against his shoulder. A monocle glittered in one eye. He was the living image of Erich von Stroheim in *Foolish Wives.*

The archivist's shock gave way to annoyance. He was the victim of a prank. Kyle Broadhead had gotten some actor friend to put on a costume and frighten him out of a night's sleep. *Greed* had turned out to be a wild goose chase and this was his way of getting back at Valentino for the waste of his time.

"Tell Kyle you accomplished your mission," he said. "What did he do, promise you a part in Mel Brooks's next—"

"Silence!" The riding crop whistled through the air and struck one of the shining boots with a report like a pistol shot. The crop pointed at him. "You vill safe *mein Kind!"*

Valentino forced himself to meet the iron gaze. It seemed to him that the eye not covered by the monocle was moist.

Something burred. "Von Stroheim" looked up as if hearing an air-raid siren, then vanished. The shaft of moonlight was empty.

The burring continued in bursts, with brief silences between. Valentino stirred from under the covers and lifted the receiver off the telephone on the nightstand. His "Hello" was hoarse.

"You need to get out of San Francisco. You're starting to sound like a foghorn."

"Kyle?"

"Did I wake you?"

"No big deal. I was having a stupid dream." Only as he said it did he realize it *was* a dream. He switched on the lamp, dispelling the last wisp of phantasm from the room. "What's in the cans, the director's cut of *Showgirls?"*

"Nope. I only risked a peek, but I think it's the bonanza. I'm calling from the Oracle on my cell. We might have the full eight hours here. And something else we didn't count on."

I am counting on you, von Stroheim had said. Valentino regret-

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ted ordering prawn from downstairs. "What?"

"A skeleton."

Valentino had taken a cab to LAX on his way out. Broadhead met him with the hybrid electric car he drove whenever he felt like irritating the department head, a conservative sourpuss who leased SUVs that increased in size in direct proportion to the amount of fuel they consumed. Valentino wedged his bag into the backseat and folded himself into the passenger's side in front.

"How were the trailers?" Broadhead spoke above the ticking of the motor.

"A little foxed. Nothing serious. What kind of skeleton?"

"Human, I'm pretty sure. I'm not an anthropologist. It was crammed under the seat."

"What seat?"

"That bench in the vault. It made a hollow sound when I laid one of my cases on it. I groped around until I found the edge of the lid. I may be the first person to discover that extra bit of storage space since the place was built. Or the second. Someone had to have put the skeleton in there."

"Cases?"

"My invention. Aluminum carriers, with vacuum pumps to seal them airtight. Prevents oxidation while the film's in transport. I should apply for a patent. It'd mean a cool twelve bucks in royalties annually, film preservation being the growth industry it is." He puffed on his burning pipe, filling the vehicle with noxious gases.

"How long do you think the skeleton's been in there?"

"Forty years, anyway. I called your realtor. To satisfy my curiosity about the film, not the bones. The vault was plastered over when they bought the theater in 1961. Plaster started falling a month ago and they tore the rest down. They had to have a key made for the vault. No one knew it was there."

"Did you call the police?"

"It seemed wise. I took the liberty of moving *Greed* to the university first. Care to see it?"

"Do you think the police will let me in?"

The professor looked over at him. "I meant *Greed.*"

Broadhead, who had a class to teach, left Valentino at the Oracle and ticked away. A woman named Sergeant Franks allowed the new owner into the secured area. She was tall enough to have played basketball in college, and not long ago. She stooped to shake Valentino's hand on the landing outside the projection booth. "I see the resemblance," she said. "Grandson?"

"No relation. You seem young to know Valentino at all."

"I thought he was a fashion designer until my lieutenant set me

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right." She brushed a dangling shard of plaster away from her teased-out hair. "You sure bought yourself a wreck. Planning to raze and develop?"

"Actually, I hope to restore it." Valentino gave her a card.

" 'Film detective.' That's a bureau I never saw downtown."

"It's a jazzy name for a procurer. I'm a preservationist."

"Theaters?"

"Movies. This started out as a search for a new house with a better screening room."

"Well, I bet it's bigger. Did you know a corpse came with the place?" Franks smiled girlishly. But her eyes were sharp.

"If I had, I'd have tried to bargain down the price."

"Mm-hm. I understand you were out of town when it turned up."

"I had a business appointment."

The sergeant consulted a notebook with a red cover. "A Professor Broadhead called it in. Interesting man. Said you asked him to come in and poke around?"

"He's an expert on old film stock. There were some specimens in the vault. They can be volatile. I didn't want to touch them until after he'd had a chance to inspect them."

"Volatile like explosive?"

"If exposed to flame. In this case I should have said fragile. Before the nineteen fifties, when safety stock was introduced, motion-picture film contained silver nitrate. It deteriorates rapidly if not properly stored, just as silver corrodes. Half of all films made before nineteen fifty have been lost for that reason; ninety percent before nineteen twenty. All we retain of Theda Bara, for instance, are a few dozen production stills. Her career has vanished."

Franks wrote something in her notebook, possibly *Theda Bara.* "This stuff valuable?"

"To film history. It doesn't compare to, say, a Rembrandt painting. Colleges and film societies can't afford to pay as much as a syndicate of Japanese tycoons." Valentino smiled. Did she suspect him of a forty-year-old murder? If it was murder.

"Mm-hm. Man who's seen as many pictures as you, I guess you're not squeamish."

"I still flinch when Lon Chaney's mask comes off in *The Phantom of the Opera.*"

"That one I know. I saw the road show when it played L.A. Come in and take a look. Maybe you can give us a positive ID, ha-ha."

A photographer tripped his flash just as Valentino entered the oversize booth behind the sergeant. The timing, as if on cue for the first take of a criminal-investigation scene, made him feel as if he'd stepped onto a live set. He had the sensation that the man with the camera, the uniformed officer scribbling in his report book, the pair of technicians mixing and applying their powders, the woman in

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the green smock bent over something inside the open vault, had all been running their lines and primping only a moment before.

"Ms. Johansen, a minute?" Franks said.

The woman in the smock sat back. She wore a cuplike mask over her nose and mouth. When she took it off, Valentino was struck by the perfection of her features. She was a shorthaired blonde with elliptical blue eyes, clear and unflawed. Her nose was straight and she had a generous mouth that looked as if it might contain a smile as bright as a klieg. She wasn't smiling.

"A minute is an hour," she said. "What's so important? Oh, hello." She noticed Valentino and moderated her scowl.

"Hello. I didn't know bacteria was a problem."

"What? Oh, the mask. I'm allergic to dust." She sneezed.

Franks said, "Mr. Valentino owns the building. Harriet Johansen. She's with the criminal-science division."

"Forgive me for not shaking hands." She held up a miniature whiskbroom in a rubber glove.

He looked past her. A drop cord clipped to one of the racks inside the vault shed halogen light into the low bench, whose top was tipped back to expose the recessed interior. In that moment he realized he'd never seen a human skeleton "in person," and was mildly surprised to learn that it didn't look much different from those he'd seen in movies. The leering skull and hooplike ribs wore a fine coat of gray dust. He should have been horrified. Many thousands of feet of Universal and Hammer shockers had desensitized him to this basic symbol of mortality. There was a musty odor that reminded him of old magazines.

"He was a little dude," Harriet Johansen said. "Couple of inches taller and he'd have had to be folded."

"How do you know it was a he?" Valentino asked.

"Shape of the pelvis. Also I caught him looking down my blouse when I bent over."

He grinned. "Was it murder?"

"Tell you when I finish dusting, maybe. If there was bone trauma, a skull fracture, or a blade or a bullet nicked a rib, yes. Without that, or a loose slug somewhere in the box, all we've got is improper disposal of a body." She sneezed again. "Excuse me."

"Gesundheit. Was he naked?"

"No sign of even the remnants of clothing. That indicates homicide. Attempt to foil identification. Did you do it?"

"I have an alibi. They walled off the room before I was born."

Franks said, "Who told you that?"

"Kyle Broadhead called the realty company." He knew he'd made a mistake even before he finished speaking.

"Inquisitive type, isn't he?" The sergeant's tone was flat.

He straightened from his crouch, as if his back were sore. He

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was stalling. "He wanted to know how long the films had been in the vault."

"I'd like a look at those films."

"Actually, it's only one. Forty or fifty reels. And it has to stay in a stable environment. I don't think the police evidence room qualifies."

"It's evidence in a homicide. I can get a warrant."

"You don't even know if it is a homicide." Valentino exhaled. "I'll try to arrange a screening. It takes time. A new negative has to be struck from the original, and a positive made from that onto safety stock. The film is almost eighty years old. Running it through a projector would destroy it."

Franks snatched a ribbon of cobweb away from her face. "I'll give you three days."

Johansen sneezed. Valentino and Franks said, "Gesundheit."

"You need to have new cards made." Broadhead ran a pipe cleaner through the barrel of his pipe. "You've got *detective* on the brain."

Valentino said, "You know and I know we can't transfer eight hours of vintage celluloid in three days. If the case isn't wrapped up before then, we can say goodbye to *Greed* for the second and last time."

"If the police haven't been able to solve the case in forty years, what makes you think you and I can?"

"They didn't know there *was* a case before today. Anyway, you found *Quo Vadis?* and that went back a *lot* further."

"It took me thirty years."

"You didn't have me to help."

"You're an arrogant young fool."

"And you're a pompous old crotch. Where's the film?"

"In the cooler, where else? I had to move *Ivan the Terrible* to make room for it. I hope *Ivan* gets along with *Battleship Potemkin.* They're sharing a rack." Broadhead pursed his lips Hitchcock fashion. "You know, it's only a movie. Not worth prison time."

"I haff to safe his *Kind."*

"What?"

"That stupid dream. I can't do it without you, Kyle."

"You can't do it *with* me." He laid the pipe on his desk in two pieces. "Where do we start?"

"When Max Fink sold the Oracle."

"That was in nineteen twenty-nine!"

Valentino looked at his watch. "You're right. We'd better get started."

They divvied up two of the four estates. Broadhead took Government, Valentino the Press. While the professor pored over the Los Angeles County property records at the Civic Center, the film

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detective visited the microfilm room in the library downtown and scrolled through ancient numbers of the L.A. *Times*. After a while he stopped mooning over the advertised premieres of films that no longer existed and confined his attention to the local news sections.

Four hours later, squinting against the glare of the 21st century, he met Broadhead in their downtown hangout, a micropub with four-sheets on the walls of W.C. Fields playing poker, Errol Flynn in tights, and Marilyn fluttering too close to the flame. Valentino was famished and ordered the Fatty Arbuckle Burger. Broadhead, parched and smelling of old plat books, drank a pitcher of stout.

"The theater changed hands three times between twenty-nine and thirty-seven," Valentino said. "The last time was to a guy named—"

"Warren Pegler," Broadhead finished. "He sold it in fifty-six to a film society. They showed Fellini to college students until they couldn't afford to support the hobby. That's when your realty firm bought it and rented it to hippies. They didn't care if the toilets flushed."

"The *Times* did a human-interest piece on Pegler when he took over. He was a double amputee, lost both legs in an accident in the developing lab at Metro, where he worked. Invested his compensation check in Warner Brothers just before *The Jazz Singer,* pulled out of the stock market two months ahead of the twenty-nine crash."

"Your reading was more interesting than mine."

"Trade you places," Valentino said.

"You mean you drink, I eat?" Broadhead refilled his glass from the pitcher.

"I mean I only read up to nineteen forty. I need you to check the papers from just before Pegler sold the Oracle until it changed hands again. The vault was already plastered over when the realty firm acquired it. Whoever did that must have known about the body inside."

"Redecorating projects don't always make the papers."

"Disappearances usually do. Whoever was using that skeleton dropped out of sight suddenly. I'm assuming someone missed him and reported it to the police."

"And what will you be doing while I'm working up an appetite looking for corpses in the *Times?*"

"Pegler interests me. County records should tell me if he has any heirs. They might know something."

"Why bother with the heirs? Talk to the man himself."

"He'd be a hundred if he were alive," Valentino said.

"Ninety-six." The professor fished a spiral notebook out of an inside pocket. "Last January, a district judge ruled him incompetent to care for himself and committed him to a nursing home in San Diego. Here's the address."

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A tasteful sign at the end of a broad composition driveway identified a low brick building surrounded by trees as the Autumn Leaf Elder Care Facility. Valentino parked in a small lot that still had plenty of room for visitors and tapped on an open door marked OFFICE inside the foyer. A young woman in a USC sweatshirt with her hair in a ponytail looked up from her desk. He introduced himself and said he was there to see Mr. Pegler.

"Warren." She smiled. "Is your first name Eric?"

He hesitated. "No."

"I'm sorry. Warren has his bad days. When he's not entirely lucid, he keeps asking for someone named Eric. I thought it might be a family member. He never has visitors, so I assumed—" She shrugged. "Are you a relative?"

He gave her a card. "I'm a film archivist. I understand Mr. Pegler worked in the developing lab at MGM in the twenties. I wanted to ask him some questions about early Hollywood." He was pretty sure "about a murder" would not result in an interview.

"You've told me more about his background than he's ever told any of us, except when he's regressing, and that's usually a jumble. From some of the things he's said, I thought he had something to do with pictures. He's having a good day today. He'll enjoy a visit. Room eighteen."

He passed some bent elderly people pulling themselves along a rail in the hallway and stopped before eighteen. A loud argument appeared to be going on inside. Then he recognized Humphrey Bogart's raspy lisp, inviting the coppers to come up and get him. Valentino knocked loudly to make himself heard above the TV. The shouting stopped and a voice told him to come in.

"You don't look like you have any pills for me. Come to rob me?"

The old man seated in the wheelchair next to the bed had a full head of white hair and lively eyes in a thin, pale, pleated face. He wore a white dress shirt that looked freshly ironed and loose tailored slacks, cut off and sewed neatly at the knees, below which there was nothing. He pointed his remote control at Valentino as if it were a gun. On the TV screen atop his bureau, Bogie was shooting it out with the police in silence.

Valentino said no and held out a card. Pegler moved his lips over what was printed on it. His ninety-six-year-old eyes appeared to be in good working condition.

"What the hell's a film detective?"

Valentino explained, then added, "I just bought the Oracle Theater. I wanted to ask you some things about it as a former owner."

"You bought yourself a money hole, how's that for starters? Cost you a lot less just to hang a sign around your neck saying ROB ME. Patrons, the tax man, studios, even my own projectionist took everything that wasn't bolted down. Then Washington took every-

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thing that was. I was all set to sell to Paramount when Antitrust told the studios they couldn't own theaters anymore. That was in forty-seven. The next nine years broke me and I finally let the old trap go to real-estate sharks for less than I owed in back taxes."

"Why didn't you sell *Greed?* Plenty of collectors would have made you a handsome price even then." He watched closely for Pegler's reaction.

The old man's face was blank. "Sell greed? I didn't think that was something you sold. Folks are generally born with it."

"I'll get to the point, Mr. Pegler. A man's skeleton was found in the film vault at the Oracle, along with some reels of old film. Do you know anything about it?"

"What vault? I stored all the pictures I rented in the basement."

"The realty firm tore down a plaster wall that was covering the vault. I thought you might know who put it up."

Pegler scowled at his remote, as if he might wipe Valentino out by changing channels. "You're asking me to take a lot at face value. *If* you're who you say you are, *if* you own the Oracle, *if* there's a skeleton and film in a vault, that wall was there when I bought the place. You'll have to ask Max Fink. You'll find him in Forest Lawn under six feet of California."

Valentino didn't press the point. "I understand you were a film technician at Metro."

"Don't make it sound so grand. I was an assistant developer. Young squirt that I was, I planned to run the studio one day, take Thalberg's place. Then some damn fool left a cigarette burning next to some fresh film stock. When the flames hit the chemicals, the dark room went up. Me, too. They had to cut me in half to save what didn't burn." He thumped one of his stumps with the hand holding Valentino's card. The card slipped from his fingers and fluttered to the floor. It reminded Valentino of a cinder.

"I'm sorry."

"Not necessary. I was going to direct, then produce, then buy the studio. Instead I bought a theater. Folks needed a place to go to forget when times got hard. It was a good living right up till I got robbed."

Valentino thanked him for the information and grasped the doorknob. "Who's Eric?" he asked.

"Eric?" The old man shook himself out of the past. "These kids around me gossip like old women. I get confused sometimes. Eric was my first dog. Smartest Great Dane you ever saw. Hell, he's dead ninety years. Coal wagon run over him."

"I thought it might have been Erich von Stroheim. You both worked at Metro."

"That old fake. I'd hear him snarling at my boss outside while I was developing. You couldn't print a frame fast enough to bring a

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smile to that fish face. Said he once belonged to Franz Josef's Imperial Guard. I bet he shoveled out the stable."

"He was a great director, though."

"So was DeMille, and *he* knew how to work inside a budget. You know von Stroheim shut down production on *Merry Go Round* three days waiting for delivery on Austrian Army underwear that never showed up on screen? He broke the bank finally. That's when Mayer bought the studio and fired him."

Valentino was about to point out that things hadn't happened quite that quickly when Pegler lifted his remote and flipped the TV sound back on, just in time for Bogart to catch a bullet in the back and plummet to his death. The film detective left. On his way out he leaned into the office. "I'm afraid Mr. Pegler didn't enjoy my visit after all."

The woman in the ponytail smiled sympathy. "A little thorny, was he? That's how you know it's one of his good days."

Kyle Broadhead was teaching an evening class when Valentino got back to UCLA. Valentino went to his own office to wait and found his message light blinking. Sergeant Franks had called and left her number at Homicide. He thought about putting off returning the call—she might have decided to rescind the three-day reprieve and demand immediate delivery of *Greed*—but worrying about disaster was as bad as the disaster itself. He dialed the number.

"You academic types keep police hours," Franks said. "Ever hear of a director named Castle?"

He hesitated. "William Castle. He shot horror flicks on the cheap during the '50s and '60s. He used gimmicks to heighten the reaction: battery-charged seats to shock the audience, painted sheets on wires to send spooks flying over their heads, actors in costume running up and down the aisles. Early experimental theater."

"That checks. Department computer shows him answering a public-nuisance complaint in nineteen fifty-eight for scaring an old lady half to death during a showing of something called *The House on Haunted Hill* at the Oracle. Care to hear the particulars?"

He said yes. He felt a tingle, as if he were sitting in one of Castle's electrified seats.

"Seems a wire or something broke thirty minutes in and a certain object dropped into the old lady's lap. She wet her pants and screamed for a cop. Guess what it was."

"A human skeleton."

"Maybe you *are* part detective. Well, this Castle is a skeleton himself now, so we can't grill him. But if no dental records turn up suggesting otherwise, which is a crapshoot anyway after all this time, we may safely consider Mr. Bones an alumnus of some medical-school anatomy class and redirect our energies toward

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murders that took place in this century."

"What does Harriet Johansen say?"

"About what, the case or your perfect cheekbones? I'm not a dating service."

"She said I had perfect cheekbones?"

"Don't assume you're off the hook," the sergeant snarled. "I don't close cases on the evidence of convenience. You've got sixty hours to deliver that old film." The connection broke.

Broadhead's office was locked. Either he'd gone straight home from his class or had stopped in and come back out, assuming Valentino was still in San Diego. The film detective went home. This time he dreamed von Stroheim was dancing with a skeleton.

"If you're determined to rot your brain, make sure the tripe you write about is entertaining," Broadhead said. "When you return *Dumb and Dumber,* rent a Blondie film and write about Penny Singleton."

The student shuffled out in his baggy pants and *Scary Movie* T-shirt, carrying his paper rolled up with the scarlet *F* inside.

"He compared Jim Carrey to Chaplin." The professor buckled his briefcase and scowled at Valentino as if he were responsible for the student's lapse. "Good morning. You look conflicted. Did the canary you swallowed give you heartburn?"

Valentino told him about William Castle.

"I knew that," Broadhead said. "The incident made the front page of the Entertainment section in fifty-eight."

"Is that all you found?" Valentino accompanied him up the steps of the lecture hall.

"Nope. I almost stopped looking after March nineteen fifty-six. That's when the projectionist at the Oracle disappeared."

Valentino stopped with one foot on the top step.

Broadhead switched on his desk lamp and handed Valentino the printout from the *Times* City section:

POLICE SEEK THEATER EMPLOYEE

The Fugitive detail of the Los Angeles Police joined the Missing Persons bureau today in the search for a projectionist who vanished between his home and his job at the Oracle Theater Sunday afternoon. Theft and flight are suspected.

Albert Spinoza, 21, a film student at the University of Southern California and a part-time licensed projectionist, was reported missing Monday morning by his mother, with whom he lived, after he failed to return home Sunday night from his job at the Oracle on South Broadway. Oracle owner and manager Warren Pegler told police that Spinoza did not show up for work Sunday afternoon. Pegler, who is supervising a remodeling project inside the theater, said that a matinee showing of *The Ten Commandments* had to be

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canceled, as no replacement could be found who was licensed by the Motion Picture Projectionists' Union.

This morning, Pegler reported to police that the box-office cash receipts were missing from Saturday night's premiere screening of *The Ten Commandments*. He told officers an estimated $1,000 had disappeared from a safe in the projection booth. Police believe that Spinoza may have fled with the receipts.

The article took up five inches at the bottom of a column. "Anything else?" Valentino asked.

"Couple of items rehashing the same information, then a two-inch piece at the end of April announcing the police had abandoned the investigation. No leads."

"Pegler said something about his projectionist robbing him, along with the government and everyone else. I thought he was just ranting."

Broadhead gave him his Hitchcock look. "There's another explanation for Spinoza's vanishing act. Did you read the whole article?"

"I caught the reference to a remodeling project. You think that's when the wall went up?"

"A safe was mentioned, but no vault. You'd think that with a man missing, the police would ask questions about fresh plaster."

"Maybe Pegler answered them. He was past fifty even then, a legless man in a wheelchair. Probably told them some salty stories about early Hollywood. Without anything else to go on they might have written him off as a harmless old character."

"L.A. police were just introducing computers then," Broadhead said. "Your Sergeant Franks brought up a nineteen fifty-eight complaint. If the department's in the habit of erasing obsolete files to make room on the hard drive, nineteen fifty-six might take awhile. It's somewhere, though. When she finds out about Spinoza, the Castle theory goes to the back of the closet."

Valentino shook his head. "The theft of a thousand dollars seems cheap for a murder motive, even by Eisenhower-era standards."

"Who says theft had anything to do with it? Pegler's the only source for the information there even was a theft. It helped make the idea of a voluntary disappearance more plausible, to cover the fact that Spinoza was already on his way toward becoming a skeleton in the vault. The real reason would be a lot juicier. Any one of the seven sins would do. One especially."

"Greed."

"Which would mean Franks was right after all," Broadhead said. "The film's involved."

"Which means we're back where we started. We have to make the case before the film winds up as confetti on the floor of the police evidence room."

The professor stood and charged his pipe from a humidor

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shaped like Oliver Hardy. "I don't have another class until three. If we leave now we can beat the San Diego traffic both ways."

The woman in the ponytail wasn't smiling. She had on yesterday's sweatshirt or one just like it. "I'm afraid Mr. Pegler's having one of his bad days. The conversation's apt to be one-sided."

Valentino said, "My friend's closer to his age. Maybe he can draw him out."

Broadhead glowered.

"I didn't mean you'd be doing all the talking," the woman said. "When Warren's like this, he goes on and on about obscure things. Most of the people he talks about are probably dead."

"Good."

She glared at Broadhead.

"He means we're good listeners," Valentino said.

"Eric, that you?"

Broadhead, closing the door of room eighteen behind them, glanced from the man in the wheelchair to Valentino, who shrugged. "He says it was his dog."

"Poppycock. I heard an *h.*"

"How can you hear an *h* in Eric?"

"Erich?"

This time Valentino actually heard the *h.* He had an insane idea. He coarsened his voice. "Varren? Varren Pekler, iss dat choo?"

"Easy on the accent," Broadhead muttered. "He's senile, not stupid."

"Erich, you old fake. Still wearing that monocle. I bet you're blind in both eyes by now. I heard you were dying."

Valentino paused. Von Stroheim had died in France in 1957. He'd been dying when Albert Spinoza disappeared. "I am not dead yet, you drugstore developer. Vhere is *mein Kind?*"

"Speak English, you damn kraut. What kin?"

"Greed."

Pegler wore what appeared to be a fresh white dress shirt and a different pair of tailored slacks. Today, however, he was huddled deep in his chair, looking shrunken beneath a heavy afghan across his shoulders on a warm California day in late spring. His eyes still shone, but were moist, not sharp. He clearly didn't understand.

Valentino played a wild card. "Don't act schtupid. You developed every frame of the original fifty reels. I know you didn't destroy dem vhen T'alberg told you to. I vant *Greed!*" He barked the last word. Broadhead jumped.

Pegler didn't. His face became more wizened. It took on a sly cast. "You'll have it when I give it to you, not before. Until then you can go on paying me."

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"You are *blackmailink* me?" In his excitement, Valentino wasn't faking the accent. He *was* von Stroheim. He tightened one fist, grasping an imaginary riding crop.

"Don't swing that monkey-stick at me," Pegler said. "I'm charging you storage. You can croak right here in the booth if you want. I don't care. I'm not Spinoza."

"What about Spinoza?" Broadhead asked. Valentino nudged him. He was afraid a strange voice would break the spell.

The old man didn't seem to notice. "He got to snooping in the vault. When he found *Greed,* he wanted to send the reels to France so you would have them before you died. My fault for hiring a film-school student. He thought you were a great artist. He didn't know he was working for a greater one. How could he? He wasn't born when my legs burned off."

Valentino and Broadhead were silent. The thin old face bent in the middle, making a smile as sharp as a lance. "Still smoking, Erich?" he asked.

Harriet Johansen wore a blue dress to the private screening. It brought out the startling color in her eyes. Valentino told her the smock she wore on the job didn't do her justice.

He took her on a tour of the Oracle. Most of the debris had been cleared away, but years and many tens of thousands of dollars of work remained before the theater would begin to resemble a shadow of its early self. He had borrowed one of the university's big Bell & Howell projectors and with Kyle Broadhead's help had installed it in the booth. Broadhead, who was a licensed projectionist, came down to shake the criminal specialist's hand, then went back up to thread in the first reel. It would be the first showing of the restored *Greed* on safety stock outside the Moviolas at UCLA.

Valentino, wearing a burgundy smoking jacket that had belonged to John Barrymore, poured the wine and escorted Harriet to the only two adjacent seats in the mezzanine that retained their original upholstery. Sapphire light trickled into pools on the faded carpet from the wall sconces. They'd been rewired only that morning.

"Are you going to live here?" she asked.

"Where better, for a professional film buff?"

"You'll never get away from the movies."

"The movies are where you go to get away from everything else."

She shook her golden head. "I have a confession to make. I've never seen a silent movie."

He touched her glass in an unspoken toast to the experience. "You'll have to promise to see it again when it's scored. Silent films were never really silent. When it premieres in public, I hope to have funding for a full orchestra. That's if the renovations don't put me out in the middle of South Broadway."

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She looked up at the ceiling, gutted of its frescoes and chandelier. "A skeleton isn't going to fall in my lap, is it?"

"If it did, you'd probably just dust it off. I imagine you told Sergeant Franks the bones weren't William Castle's property."

"Skeletons used for demonstration purposes are linked together with wire," she said. "That had never been done with Albert Spinoza."

"You've identified him positively?"

"The FBI lab in Sacramento ran the DNA from marrow samples. I doubt the evidence will be used in court. Warren Pegler's in a bad way, I heard. They moved him from the prison ward to the ICU."

"If he does make it to trial, Franks can have the nitrate print for evidence. We have a fresh negative in the can and two positives on safety stock in the cooler."

"It sounds like the film was in better shape than the murder victim."

"Film isn't flesh," he said. "Different conditions apply."

"So it was Erich von Stroheim's careless smoking that ended Pegler's dream to direct. I've seen pictures of the German with a cigarette holder clamped between his teeth."

"Austrian. Anyway, who knows? Pegler believed it. He had to have already struck off an extra print of *Greed* and removed it from the Metro lot, to save it from destruction. He knew film and probably recognized a masterpiece. After the fire, it gave him the chance to revenge himself on the man he held responsible for his tragedy. Not to mention a great deal in ransom not to destroy the film. The cash from von Stroheim sweetened Pegler's investments in the stock market. That's how he managed to buy the Oracle."

"Spinoza's skull was fractured," she said. "Pegler must have hit him with something from behind, probably when he turned toward the vault to steal the film. After he fell inside, the rest was easy. Pegler stripped the body to stall identification, dumped it into the storage space, shut the vault door, and walled it up, just like Edgar Allan Poe." She brightened. "Got any Vincent Price pictures?"

"Next time," Valentino said.

"So vengeance was the motive."

"And greed."

"Hold your horses." Broadhead sounded testy in the booth. "This isn't like operating a VCR, you know."

The film began rolling. Ten minutes into the first reel, caught up in the story of the dullard dentist whose animal needs draw him into the abyss, Harriet snuggled close to Valentino and intertwined her fingers with his on the swan-shaped arm of the seat. He smiled at her and used a corny old movie line. "Where have you been all my life?"

"I know where I'll be the next eight hours." ●

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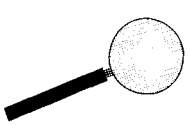

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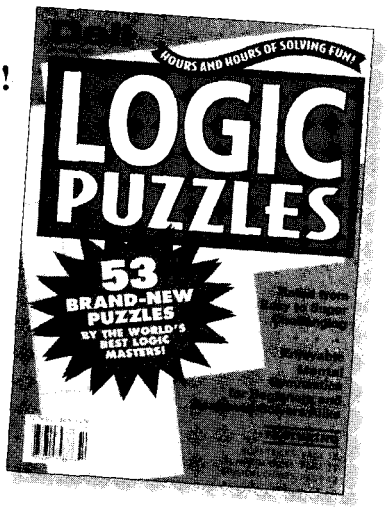

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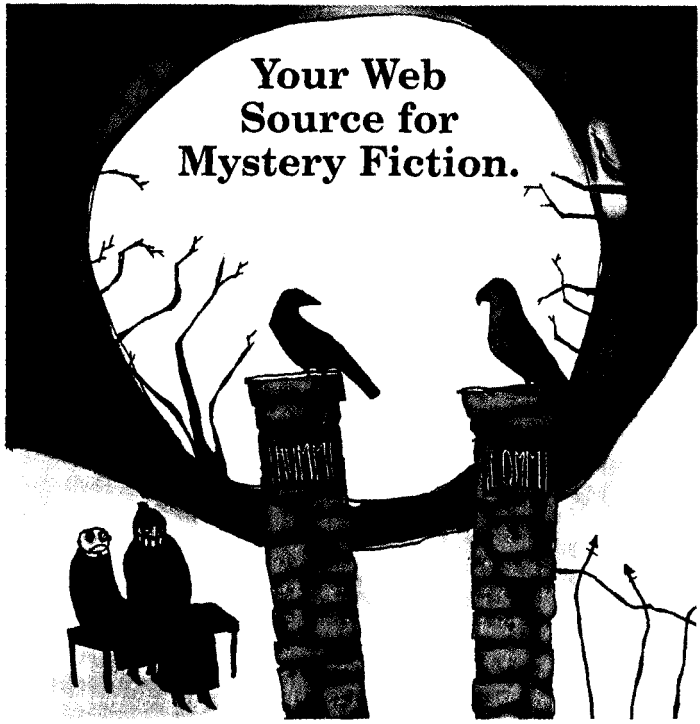

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